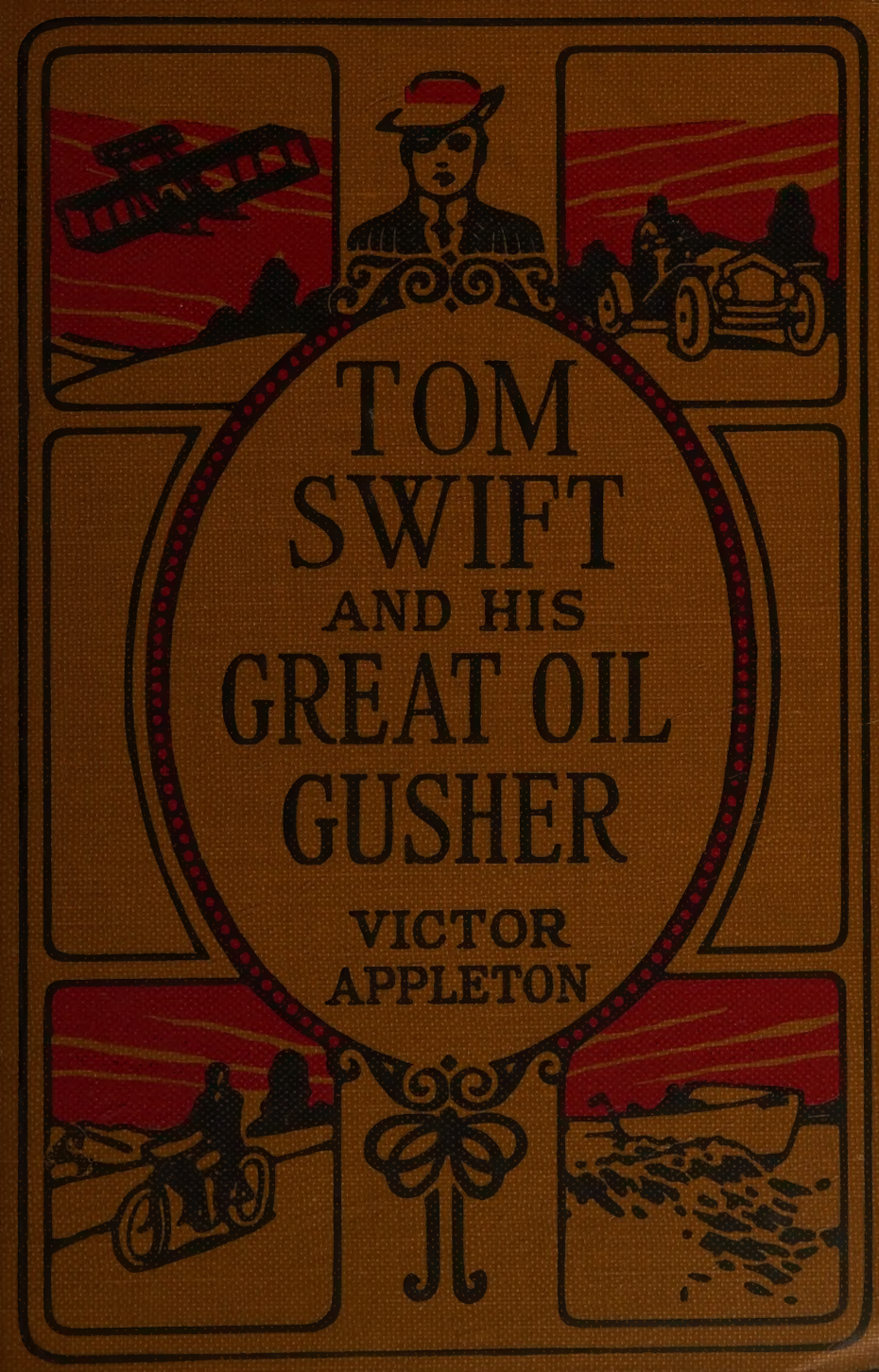
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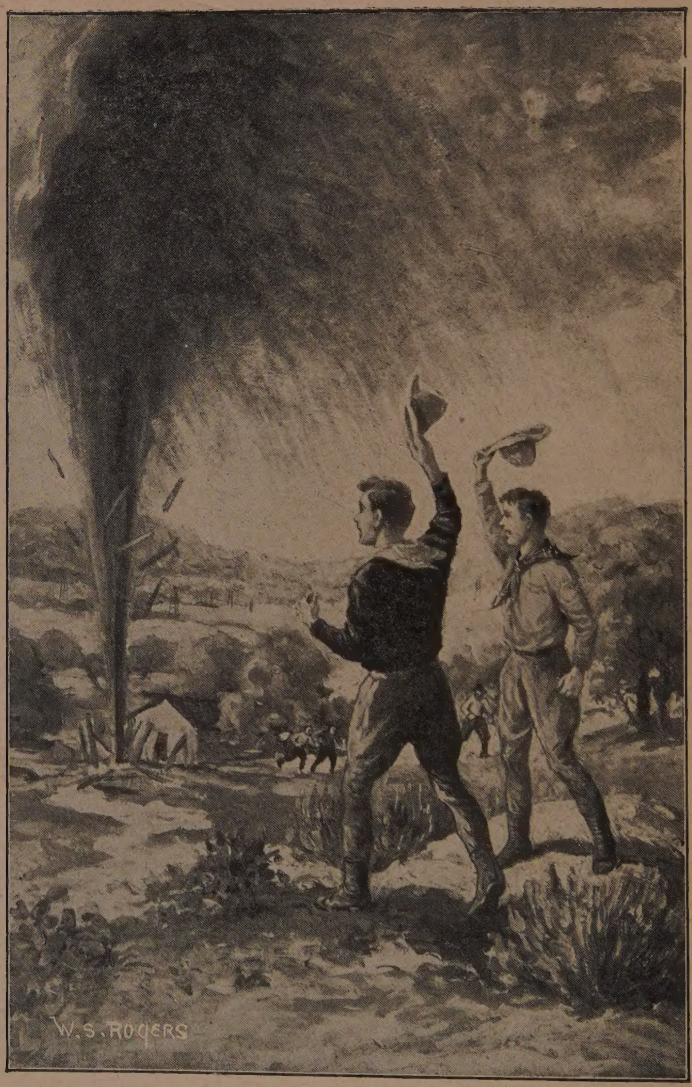

THE OIL SHOT A HUNDRED FEET INTO THE AIR IN A HUGE BLACK GEYSER.

Tom Swift and His Great Oil Gusher. *Page* 165

TOM SWIFT AND HIS GREAT OIL GUSHER

OR

The Treasure of Goby Farm

By

VICTOR APPLETON

Author of "Tom Swift and His Motor Cycle," "Tom Swift Among the Diamond Makers," "Tom Swift and His Flying Boat," "The Moving Picture Boys Series," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

GROSSET & DUNLAP

PUBLISHERS

Made in the United States of America

BOOKS FOR BOYS
By VICTOR APPLETON

12mo. Cloth. Illustrated.

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Tom Swift and His Great Oil Gusher

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TOM SWIFT AND HIS GREAT OIL GUSHER

CHAPTER I

THE FALLING AIRPLANE

"A GRAND day for a spin in the air, Ned," remarked Tom Swift, as he stretched his arms and looked through the window of his office. "What do you say? Come along and let the wind blow some of the cobwebs out of your brain."

"Get thee behind me, Satan," replied Ned Newton, the young financial manager of the Swift Construction Company. "I've got a heap of work yet to do in checking up this last monthly statement."

"That'll keep," said Tom. "You'll find the figures waiting patiently for you when you get back. I know you're well ahead of your work, anyway, and a whirl in the circumambient will do you good. You see, I'm only thinking of you."

"Yes, you are, you old hypocrite!" laughed

Ned, who was about the same age and on the warmest terms of friendship with his talented young employer. "I've known for the last half hour that you weren't paying any attention to what I've been saying and that your fingers were itching to get hold of the control lever of the *Hummingbird*. Well, I suppose you've got to get it out of your system, and it might as well be now as later. You go and tune up the old bus, and I'll be with you just as soon as I've given some directions to my stenographer."

Tom went off to the flying field, where several airplanes of his own construction, from the smallest to the largest sizes, were kept in readiness for use, and selected one which he had dubbed the *Hummingbird* because of its diminutive size. Ned had suggested the name, *Aerial Mosquito*, but Tom had rejected this as casting a stigma on his pet which had never "stung" them yet.

It was an attractive little craft, and Tom patted it lovingly as he went over every strut of the plane to see that it was in perfect condition. Long experience in flying had taught him to take nothing for granted. But there was nothing, even to his critical eye, that was lacking, and the same was true of the engine, which purred smoothly as it broke into its rhythmical song.

"Listen to that!" Tom cried enthusiastically to Ned, who by this time had rejoined him.

"Isn't she humming sweetly? Never misses a note. No grand opera prima donna has anything on her!"

"She sure sounds good," agreed Ned, as he climbed into his seat and adjusted his straps.

With one last look that took in everything, Tom followed him and started the plane. The take-off was perfect. She ran along the ground for a little distance and then soared into the air like a bird. Tom let her climb, feeling out the air currents, until they were at a height of about eight hundred feet. Then he put her on a level keel and settled back in his seat to enjoy his ride to the full. At that moment he would not have exchanged places with any one on earth.

It was one of the perfect days that come in the late spring. There was scarcely a cloud in the sky. The sun was warm but not oppressive, and was tempered by a light and refreshing breeze. Below stretched a vast panorama of hill and valley and woodland, the trees and meadows luxuriant with their new coat of green. At the moment they were above Lake Carlopa, and they could see its waters gleaming like a mirror of crystal beneath the rays of the sun.

"Some scenery!" exclaimed Tom jubilantly.

"You said it," agreed Ned. "It reminds me of that iceberg where we found the treasure—it's so different."

"Where we found the treasure but nearly lost our lives," replied Tom, his face growing a little sober with the recollection. "Phew! it makes me shiver just to think of it. We've been in some pretty tight places, Ned, but that was the closest squeak of all."

"I wouldn't care to repeat it, for a fact," said Ned. "But I've no doubt that you'll be going into something just as dangerous before long. You're a glutton for danger. I'll bet you're just pining for some other adventure."

"Nothing in sight just now," disclaimed Tom, with a laugh. "But I'm not saying that if anything beckoned I'd give it the glassy stare. There are lots of things we haven't tried yet."

"I'd like to know what they are," returned Ned skeptically. "You've been near death as many times as I have fingers and toes."

"And yet you'll notice that I'm far from being a dead one yet," said Tom lightly. "Or if I am dead, I'm a pretty lively corpse," he added. "Don't worry about me, old man."

"The pitcher that goes to the well too often, you know," warned Ned.

"Yes, I know that old wheeze," laughed Tom. "But I'm not a pitcher and——Great Scott! what's that fellow up to?"

The exclamation was wrenched from him by the peculiar gyrations of an airplane about two

miles distant. They had noted its prescence some time previously, but as they were not far from an aviation field and it was a common thing to see planes flying about, they had not given it any special attention.

Now, however, they noted that the plane was behaving much as a ship might which had lost its rudder. Its motions were confused and erratic. It would plunge downward nose first and then right itself abruptly and sail about in circles. There seemed to be no coherent plan on the part of the aviator, and indeed it acted as it might if the aviator were missing.

"Some fool aviator trying to do stunts," was Ned's comment, after he had watched it for a moment. "Those fellows make me tired. There are risks enough in flying without going out of the way to find them."

"No, I don't think it's that," said Tom anxiously. "It looks to me as if the pilot were in some sort of trouble. Lost control, sick, or something. I'm going over to see."

He turned the nose of his craft directly toward the strange plane and made for it at full speed.

The queer contortions of the plane still persisted, and Ned was by this time convinced that Tom was right. A thrill of horror went through them as the conviction grew upon them that they

might be about to witness a tragedy. If the plane should dash to the ground from such a height, there was not one chance in a thousand that the luckless pilot would survive.

They could see by this time that there was only one man in the plane, which was a much larger craft than their own. They could see him working desperately to get his craft under control. Where the trouble lay, whether with the plane or the engine, they had no means of telling. But that the man was in deadly danger and knew it, there was no longer any room for doubt.

They had come within half a mile of the strange airship when the disaster they had been dreading happened. The plane suddenly turned its nose to the earth until it pointed directly downward. Then it fell like a plummet, down, down, into the midst of a forest, where it landed with a terrific crash and was lost to sight.

A cry of horror burst from Tom and Ned.

"Quick, Tom!" cried the latter. "Can't you make a landing somewhere?"

"That's what I'm looking for," replied Tom, as his eyes swept the surrounding country in search of some open spot.

But he looked in vain. The woods extended for several miles in every direction. Here and there were small open places, but as Tom circled about, flying as low as he could without striking

the tops of the trees, he saw that none of them was large enough to permit the landing of the plane.

"There's but one thing to do," he said in a tense tone, when this conviction had become certainty. "We've got to mark the location of this place so that we can find it when we come to it again. I'll leave you to fix that in your mind. Now we'll make straight for home, get out my roadster and try to get to the place as soon as possible. The chances are that the poor fellow is dead, but we'll do all we can. You get busy on the radio, so that the car will be all ready for us to jump into the minute we get back to the works."

Ned turned his attention to the radio set with which the plane was equipped and called up Garret Jackson, the shop manager for the Swift Construction Company. He told of the accident and directed Jackson to have Tom's roadster ready and the engine going.

Tom in the meantime had been making the *Hummingbird* travel at her fastest speed, and only a few minutes elapsed before they reached the yards. He made a perfect landing, and before the plane had fairly stopped he and Ned had leaped from it and were running toward the smart roadster, alongside of which Jackson was standing.

"I've put the first-aid kit under the seat in case you should need it," said Jackson.

"Good work, Jackson," commented the young inventor, as he jumped in and took the wheel. "Perhaps you'd better come along with us. There may be work for all of us. All set? Let's go."

He threw in the clutch and the speedy machine started and was soon racing along at a record-breaking speed in the direction of the woods. Although they were fairly flying, it seemed to Tom and Ned in their anxiety that they were crawling.

"Give her the gas, Tom," urged Ned.

"She's making sixty now," replied Tom, with a glance at the speedometer. "Got the exact location, Ned?"

"Pretty nearly," replied Ned. "Turn to the right at the first road after we pass the church at the forks. That'll bring us to the Thaxton woods in which the plane fell. There's an old woods road that runs through the center of the forest, and if we keep our eyes open on either side we'll probably find it."

Soon they had passed the church and turned into the road that Ned had indicated. At that point the going was good, but as they advanced it gradually grew more rutted and rocky. Tom kept up a high speed, however, though they had to hold on and the car bounded up and down in

a manner that threatened wreck if the pace were maintained.

But a human life was in the balance, and if that could be saved nothing else mattered.

At last, deep in the woods, Tom slackened speed, for the road had "petered out." But he could see that where it ceased to be a road it had become a trail that wound its uneven way among the trees. It was barely wide enough for the car to pass along, and here and there in the road were fragments of stumps that made traveling precarious.

"Gee, Tom, you'll have to go slow here," declared Ned.

"We don't want to break our necks," added Jackson.

"We'll do the best we can," answered the young inventor. "But if either of you wants to get out and walk——"

"Nothing doing, Tom!" cried his financial manager quickly. "If you stick, so do I."

"Same here," added the shop foreman.

On and on they rushed. Once they hit a big rock and for the moment it looked as if the machine would surely go over. Ned and Jackson held their breath. Maybe one or the other thought the next minute would be his last.

But Tom was a skilled driver, and with almost miraculous deftness he piloted the car at as fast

a rate as he dared. He could not take his eyes from the road, but Ned scanned the woods on one side and Jackson on the other for any sign of the hapless airman.

They had gone perhaps half a mile when a shout came from the lips of Jackson.

"The woods are afire!" he cried, as he pointed ahead of them.

They looked in the direction indicated and saw a column of flames mounting above the tree tops.

CHAPTER II

ALMOST A TRAGEDY

Tom Swift and the two with him stared for a moment in consternation.

"It isn't the woods on fire," cried Tom. "They're too green for that; and besides we had a drenching storm two days ago. It's the plane that's blazing."

"And that poor fellow perhaps is being burned to death!" cried Ned. "Hurry, Tom; hurry!"

There was no need for urging. Tom threw caution to the winds and tore along at a reckless pace in the direction of the flames.

As he turned a bend in the trail, an exclamation escaped him. Right in the road was a small tree which had been blown down. It lay directly in front of him, completely blocking the road.

He had scarcely time to stop before colliding with it. Then with one accord all leaped from the car and tugged desperately at the tree to try to move it to one side far enough to permit the car to pass.

Although they put forth almost superhuman efforts, they soon found that their strength was unequal to the task. Tom was the first to realize it.

"No use, fellows," he panted. "We'll have to leave the car here and make the rest of the way on foot."

They clambered over the tree and started running with all their might in the direction of the blazing plane.

And while, with their hearts full of apprehension and their lungs strained almost to bursting, they are hastening to the rescue, it may be well for the benefit of those who have not read the preceding volumes of this series to tell who Tom Swift was and what had been his adventures up to the time this story opens.

Tom, now about twenty-one years old, lived in the town of Shopton, a small inland city on the shores of Lake Carlopa. His father was Barton Swift, an inventor of note. Tom had grown up among wholesome surroundings and developed into a clear-cut, athletic young fellow, a general favorite among his associates. He was frank, courageous and good-natured, never looking for trouble but never stepping aside when it turned up.

Tom may have inherited the inventive genius of his father, or it may have been the force of

example, but from his earliest years he displayed a marvelous aptitude in all things scientific and mechanical. A mere glance at any mechanical contrivance, from a watch to a steam engine, generally sufficed to give him a pretty clear idea of its working. But this was not enough. He saw not only its good qualities, but also its defects, and his active mind busied itself at once in trying to devise improvements. His success in this had been phenomenal. From his first venture into the realm of invention described in the opening volume of the series, entitled "Tom Swift and His Motor Cycle," his progress had been rapid. His ambition grew from what it fed upon, and the improvements that he added to the motor cycle were duplicated by those described in later volumes bearing on airships, submarines, rifles, cameras, searchlights, cannon and a host of other things that became famous. His friends described him as a "wizard." But Tom, who was as modest as he was ingenious, never thought of himself in that light. He was unspoiled by praise and kept on devoting himself to his chosen vocation. Like Alexander, he was always looking for new worlds to conquer.

The work that he had done naturally brought with it large financial rewards. His activities resulted in the formation of the Swift Construction Company, which, starting on a small scale, had

attained great proportions and formed the leading industry of the town of Shopton. In the development of the business Tom had been greatly aided by the financial ability of Ned Newton, his closest friend. Ned had been a clerk in one of the Shopton banks, but had left this position to become treasurer of the Swift concern. He was a genius in business management, and Tom was able with an easy mind to leave all financial details to Ned while he devoted himself to his inventions. It was an ideal combination. They were fortunate, too, in having at the head of the mechanical department Garret Jackson, a thorough mechanic himself and skilled in handling the large body of workmen on the Swift payroll.

Tom did not care overmuch for money, but of course he was glad that the business was prospering, especially as at the present time he was deeply interested in a charming young lady, Miss Mary Nestor. The attachment between them had grown rapidly of late and had been increased on Mary's part by a great service that Tom had recently done in rescuing her father from an iceberg, on which he had been marooned while in a search for health. What peril was involved in that rescue and how Tom's courage and ingenuity prevailed, are thrillingly told in the preceding volume of this series entitled: "Tom Swift

and His Flying Boat; or, The Castaways of the Giant Iceberg."

Now to return to the three who were hastening in the direction of the burning plane.

It must be confessed that they had little hope of being of use. The chances were great that the aviator had not survived the fall. Still, there was a chance, and that thought added wings to their feet as they tore through the forest.

Tom was first on the scene, with Ned close at his heels and Jackson bringing up the rear.

Resting on two trees was most of what remained of the doomed plane. It was still blazing so fiercely that they could not approach it closely. The motor had fallen through the trees to the ground, together with part of the wreckage of the plane.

There was nothing to be seen of the aviator, and they scanned the ground fearfully. Their first thought was that he must be lying crushed under the heavy motor. That fate, tragic as it was, would be better than being burned to death.

Suddenly, Tom, who had been examining all the trees that stood outlined in that great zone of light, gave a startled exclamation.

"There he is!" he cried, as he pointed to the branches of a tree fully fifty feet distant. "There, in the crotch of those two big branches."

The others looked and saw the body of a man

at the place indicated, about twenty feet from the ground. His torn clothing had caught in the branches, and big boughs supported the greater part of his weight. There was no sign of life as they gazed at the crumpled mass.

"He's been thrown or jumped from the plane!" exclaimed Tom, as all three rushed to the tree. "Here, Ned, give me your back and we'll get him down."

Ned bent his back, and Tom, with Jackson's assistance, got up on it. Even then, with his six feet of height and his long reach, he found that he was several feet short of the lowest branch.

"Hold steady, Ned, I'm going to jump," he warned.

Ned braced himself, and Tom gave a mighty leap, just clutching the bough with his outstretched hands. It was enough, however, and he swung his legs up, and in a moment was in a sitting position.

"Now, Ned, you do the same thing," he directed. "I won't be able to bring him down alone. You stand by, Jackson, when we lower him. In the meantime run back to the car and get the coil of rope that's under the seat. And bring the first-aid kit along with you at the same time."

Jackson waited only long enough to enable

Ned to get up in the same way Tom had done, and then set off on a run to the car.

Tom and Ned made their way up through the branches until they were close to the unfortunate victim of the disaster. They had to proceed with caution for fear the swaying of the branches might release the body and let it fall to the ground. But at last they were in a position where they could see the man's face.

It was a youthful face, that of a young man apparently no older than themselves. It was badly scratched and bruised, and blood was flowing from several wounds.

Tom reached under the torn coat and placed his hand on the man's heart.

"Still beating!" he exclaimed joyfully. "Not very strongly, but he's alive and he's got a fighting chance. Now, Ned, lend a hand and we'll get him down from here in a jiffy."

That, however, was more easily said than done. It was a difficult thing to release the body from the twigs and branches that held the clothing. Then, too, each of them could use only one hand to support the weight of the body, while with the other they must cling for support to the branches. It was a task that taxed their strength to the utmost.

Luckily they were both stalwart and vigorous and in superb physical condition, and the fearful

extremity in which their helpless burden lay called into play the reserve strength that can usually be depended on to meet a great emergency. Slowly and painfully they made their tortuous way down among the branches, until they rested on the lowest bough, one that seemed strong enough to support a regiment.

They paused there a moment to take breath. Jackson, in the meantime, had returned with a stout coil of rope. He tossed one end of it up to Tom. The latter caught it and made a loop which he fastened securely under the arms of the unconscious youth. Then, with Ned also holding on, he slowly paid it out until the aviator was within Jackson's reach. The moment this was done, Tom and Ned dropped to the ground, and together they unfastened the rope and laid the airman gently on the grass.

As they did so, the youth gave a groan and opened his eyes. He looked vacantly at the faces above him and then drifted again into unconsciousness.

There was a brook at a little distance, and they carried him to the bank. Then, while Ned and Jackson bathed his face and wrists with the cool water, Tom ran his hands over the body. He had had a good deal of experience with accidents, and this now stood him in stead. His face was grave when he had finished.

"His right leg is broken, and a couple of ribs as well," he announced. "He may have internal injuries also, but it will take a doctor to tell that. Hand me over that first-aid kit and I'll make a splint for the leg. Then we'll get him to the hospital as soon as possible."

Tom worked skillfully and rapidly and soon had the temporary splint in place. The pain involved in setting the broken bone roused the wounded aviator from his oblivion. Again he opened his eyes, but this time there was less of vacancy in them. He tried to speak, but though his lips moved, no sound issued from them.

Tom bent over him.

"You've been hurt," he said gently. "But you're with friends. If you tell us what your name is and where you live we'll try to get in touch with your people."

The young man muttered something that was unintelligible.

"Try once more," urged Tom kindly.

In a little louder tone and evidently with an effort of will, the injured youth said something that sounded like Hillobie.

"Did you say Hillobie?" asked Tom. "Just nod your head, either yes or no. Don't try to speak."

But the effort had been too much for the young

man's feeble strength, and he closed his eyes and lay motionless.

"We'll have to let it go at that," said Tom, rising to his feet. "Perhaps the hospital people will find papers on him that will give a clue to his identity. We'd better not wait to look for any. Now let's get him to the car."

CHAPTER III

AN ATTRACTIVE OFFER

With infinite care the three rescuers carried the injured airman to the car. They bestowed him in it with some difficulty, owing to the limited space, and then Tom took the wheel and began to back out of the woods. There was no room to turn around, and the process of getting back to the road was slow and tedious. It was fortunate that the man was unconscious, as otherwise the jolting over the rough woods trail would have been torture. But they reached the main road at last, and then Tom made up for lost time in a rapid spin to the doors of the hospital.

They carried the stranger in and gave a hurried description of the accident to the physicians in charge. Then they waited about until the doctors had made a thorough examination.

"He'll pull through," announced Dr. Sherwood, the head physician, at last. "But it's a lucky thing you fellows got to him just when you did, or otherwise he would have soon died of

shock and exhaustion. As far as we can see now, he has no internal injuries. The ribs and leg are clean breaks and probably they'll mend without complications, though it'll probably be a couple of months before he can leave the hospital. By the way, who set that leg bone?"

"I did," replied Tom, in some alarm. "I hope it was all right, Doctor?"

"It was a nifty piece of work," said the doctor, with a smile. "Couldn't have done it better myself."

"Was anything found in his pockets that would identify him?" asked Ned. "We thought he said his name was Hillobie, but we couldn't be quite sure."

"Not a thing," replied the doctor. "If he'd had any papers about him, they were shaken out during his fall. Or they may have been burned up with the plane. But probably some of his relatives or friends will read of the accident and communicate with us. I'll let you know as soon as I find out anything."

They thanked him and went out to the car.

"What a lucky thing it was that I didn't feel like work this afternoon and went out for a spin in the plane," remarked Tom, as they sped toward the Swift Construction plant.

"It sure was," agreed Ned. "But don't let it become a habit," he added, with a grin. "After

this, whenever you have an attack of spring fever, I suppose you'll make the virtuous excuse that we'd better go out and see if there isn't anybody we can rescue."

"How well you size me up," laughed Tom. "I guess after this I'll have to leave you to your old figures while I sneak out alone. But here we are at the plant. I'll drop you and Jackson here while I mosey along toward the house. I want to get a bath and slip into some clean clothes. I sure look like a hobo."

"You haven't anything on us," replied Ned, as he looked somewhat ruefully at his torn and rumpled clothes and his scratched hands, due to their scramble through the branches. "But after all," he added, "it's a cheap price to pay for having saved that poor fellow's life."

Tom drove the roadster into its garage and then made his way over to his house. This was only a little distance away, as the plant had grown up around the old homestead. For that reason, it was not the most desirable location in the world, but it had associations connected with it that were precious and made Tom and his father reluctant to abandon it. In the summer they had a pleasant little cottage some distance away where they spent much of their time, but for the greater part of the year they lived in the old homestead. One great thing in its favor was its proximity to

the plant, where Tom often worked until late in the night when he was engrossed with a new invention. Tom's mother was dead and the household was presided over by Mrs. Baggert, a motherly, efficient woman, who handled all the help and kept the home in perfect shape.

As Tom approached the gate, two figures came hurrying forward to greet him. One was a giant of a man, who had been brought home from the jungles by Tom on one of his expeditions abroad and who had become devotedly attached to him. His strength was enormous and had frequently stood Tom in good stead in moments of peril. His native name had been Koku, and this had been retained for want of a better. His English was imperfect, though he could understand anything that was said to him.

Hobbling close behind him, and holding on to his arm so that the giant should not be the first to reach Tom, was an old negro who had been in the household for years as a man of all work. His name, of which he was inordinately proud because of its mouth-filling qualities, was Eradicate Sampson, which was usually shortened by others to Rad. Tom was his idol, and the old man would have died for him.

Rad had not been at all pleased at first when Koku was brought to the old homestead. He feared that the giant might supplant him in the

affections of his young master. But gradually this feeling had worn away, and he and the good-natured giant had become close friends, although there was a constant rivalry between them as to who should serve Tom most and best.

"Doan you be in such a hurry, yo' slamdacious ole hunk o' beef," panted Rad. "Ah saw him fust an' it's mah place to tell 'im. Marse Tom, they's——"

"Men to see you," bellowed Koku, getting the message out first.

Rad glared at him and was about to emit some withering blast when he caught sight of Tom's scratched face and torn clothes.

"Wha's matter, Marse Tom?" he ejaculated. "Been in fight or smash-up?"

"Me kill any one hurt him!" cried Koku.

"I'm all right," laughed Tom, who was touched, however, by their evident concern. "Just a few scratches and nothing else. Did you say there's somebody to see me?"

"T'ree men," said Koku.

"Fo' men," corrected Rad, with a glance of scorn. "Beats all how ignoramuses some folks is. Yassah," he went on, while Koku was temporarily squelched, "Marse Damon's dere wid free udder gemmum an dey bin waitin' some time, sah."

"All right," said Tom. "But I've got to slip

upstairs and get into other clothes. You go in, Rad, and tell them I'll be down in a few minutes."

Rad shambled off with a triumphant look at Koku.

"As for you, Koku," said Tom to the giant, who immediately brightened up, "you go down to the garage and wash the roadster. I've had a long ride in it this afternoon and it needs a good cleaning. You're the only one I'd trust to do it right."

Koku straightened up proudly and strode off. Tom looked after him for a moment with an amused smile and then slipped into the house by the back way and went up to his room. He could hear the voice of his eccentric friend, Wakefield Damon, in the living room as he fumed about and, as was his habit, blessed everything in sight.

Mr. Damon was a man much older than Tom, but from the time he had let the lad have the motor cycle that had nearly crushed out the man's life and had started Tom on his inventive career, the two had been great friends. Mr. Damon was as adventurous as a boy, and had accompanied Tom on many wild trips to wilder parts of the earth.

Tom washed and dressed hurriedly and then went downstairs.

"Bless my timepiece, Tom!" exclaimed Mr. Damon, as the young man entered. "Where on

earth have you been? I've been 'phoning everywhere I could think of for the last hour."

"Sorry," replied Tom, as he shook hands with his excitable friend and glanced at the three other men in the room who had risen from their chairs. "I was out for a ride in the airplane and was detained longer than I expected."

"Bless my excuses!" said Mr. Damon. "Tom, let me introduce these three gentlemen who have called with me to see you on a matter of business."

Mr. Damon introduced to Tom in turn a Mr. Thompson, Mr. Bragden and Mr. Hankinshaw. The two former were tall, sharp-eyed men, whose every glance and movement indicated mental celerity and familiarity with business. They were immaculately dressed. Hankinshaw was fat and gross, was roughly dressed and as uncouth in his manners as he was in physical appearance. He was smoking villainous tobacco in a pipe at which he puffed incessantly.

"Well, gentlemen," said Tom pleasantly, after the introductions had taken place and they had resumed their seats, "what can I do for you?"

"We called," said Mr. Thompson, who seemed by common consent to be the spokesman of the party, "to see you about the manufacture of some special oil-drilling machinery. I happened to know Mr. Damon slightly, due to the fact that

we have some investments in another line, and in a conversation with him we told him something about our project. He immediately suggested that we get in communication with you. Said you had the ability and facilities to make just what we had in mind. Of course, the moment he mentioned your name, we recognized it, for who hasn't heard of Tom Swift, the famous inventor?"

"Oh, there are lots of people who haven't," said Tom. "I've knocked together a few little things, but——"

"Bless my modesty," broke in Mr. Damon, "listen to Tom talk. 'Knocked together a few little things!' Why, he's made airplanes and cannon and searchlights and war tanks. He's dug tunnels and goodness knows what not. Why, he's made the whole tribe of inventors look like a lot of also-rans! He's run rings around the lot of them. He's the king pin. He's—he's—" and here Mr. Damon, sputtering incoherently, stopped for lack of breath and glared reproachfully at Tom as he polished his glasses.

"It's evident that my reputation hasn't suffered at Mr. Damon's hands," laughed Tom.

"No," put in Hankinshaw, with the faintest sneer in his tone. "He makes a mighty good press agent."

Thompson warned his colleague with a look, and the latter subsided, puffing furiously at his pipe.

"Mr. Swift doesn't need any press agent," went on Thompson smoothly. "His inventions speak for themselves. But now let us get down to business. As I was saying——"

"Pardon me while I call up my business manager, Mr. Newton," interrupted Tom. "I never transact any important business without his presence and advice. He's over at the works, and I'll have him here in a minute."

CHAPTER IV

RECKLESS DRIVING

THE three visitors exchanged glances. It was evident that they did not especially welcome the suggestion. Like many business men, they had the idea that inventors were a sort of dreamy impractical race, not keen at bargaining and easy to beguile in a business deal.

Still they could not decently object to a thing so obviously correct, and after a mere instant of hesitation, Thompson made a virtue of necessity.

"We should be delighted," he said suavely.

Tom took up the telephone that rested on a table near his hand and called up the plant.

"Mr. Newton," he announced to the operator. "Hello. That you, Ned? Come right over, will you? I'm telephoning from the house. Some gentlemen are here with a business proposition and I want you here to confer with us. All right."

"And while we're about it," remarked Tom, as he put down the telephone, "I'll have my father

in, if you don't mind. He's something of an invalid, but he'll be of great help in discussing the proposition."

Thompson assented with the slightest touch of vexation, immediately repressed, and Tom called through the window to Rad to summon his father.

They talked on indifferent matters for a few minutes until Mr. Swift and Ned arrived.

"Now, Mr. Thompson," said Tom, after introductions had taken place and they had settled back in their chairs.

"As I stated," resumed Thompson, "my partners and I are interested in having some special oil-well machinery manufactured. We have recently returned from a trip to Texas, where we have been investigating the oil situation. I can't be more specific just now as to the exact location we have fixed upon for our venture for reasons that you can easily understand. We do not care to have any one know where it is, for although we have secured a large number of leases on property in the vicinity there are still more that we are negotiating for, and we do not care for competition. We think we have struck a rich field. At any rate, we are confident enough to make a try for it, although it involves a large outlay of capital. We want to get the material manufactured beforehand and shipped all at the

same time so that it will be only a matter of setting up the machinery and starting the work. If you can do the work within a stipulated time and if your prices are right, we may be able to come to an agreement. But we would want you to cut your figures to the bone."

"You can depend upon us treating you fairly in the matter of price," put in Tom, and Ned nodded assent.

"Here," said Thompson, taking up several sheets covered with figures and diagrams, "are the specifications of what we think we shall need; tubing, casings, drills, bits and the rest. They differ in some respects from those commonly in use, but we think they represent the most up-to-date inventions and improvements."

"Of course," put in Bragden, "if in the course of their manufacture you can improve on them we shall be glad to have you do so. Any new idea that comes to you we shall welcome. But, of course, that will not affect the conditions of the contract we may make with you."

"Oh, yes it will," said Tom drily. "Our contract will cover only the manufacture in exact conformity to the stipulations. If I invent anything better, the invention will belong to me."

"I don't see why," growled Hankinshaw. "It seems to me that all your brains and time belong to us while you are working on the contract."

His tone and manner were offensive, but Tom restrained his resentment and answered quietly.

"You're mistaken there," he replied. "You will see that if you look up the law on patents."

"That's all right," said Thompson soothingly. "What we are especially interested in now is the time in which you can do this and the figure at which you can do it."

"I think we can satisfy you in both particulars," replied Tom, as he looked over the plans. "We have the plant and the machinery for turning out all the implements you have down here. But, of course, in a thing of this kind we can't answer offhand. We'll have to figure out labor and material costs, overhead and other items before we can name a definite figure. Suppose you leave these papers with us, and by to-morrow night we'll be prepared to give you our terms. How will that do?"

"That's satisfactory," replied Mr. Thompson, after a moment's conference with his colleagues. "Shall we see you here or at our hotel?"

"Perhaps we'd better meet in the office of the plant," suggested Tom. "Then we can show you over the factory and let you get an idea of our facilities."

"Good idea," assented Thompson, and, rising, he and his companions took their departure.

"Bless my bank account!" exclaimed Mr.

Damon, after the visitors had gone. "I think I've let you in for a good thing, Tom, my boy."

"It may be so," replied Tom reflectively, "and I'm very much obliged to you. By the way, Mr. Damon, what do you know about these men? Are they straight? Are they financially reliable?"

"Bless my responsibility!" was the reply. "As far as I know they're all right. Thompson is the only one I know, and that but slightly; but my impression is that he has slathers of money. They've got to have some money or they wouldn't be able to lease those oil lands they were telling us about."

"Of course, that doesn't mean such an outlay as it may seem on the surface," said Ned thoughtfully. "They can lease all the farmland they want at a dollar an acre. The farmer is perfectly willing to let it go for that, for he wins any way. If oil isn't found on his land he still has his property, and the dollar an acre is pure velvet. If it is found, he is allowed by law a royalty of one-eighth of the profit from the well or wells."

"How do you come to know so much about it?" asked Tom, in some surprise. "I thought that your head was so full of figures that you didn't have much time for anything else. Haven't been investing in oil stocks, have you?" he added laughingly.

"Not exactly," answered Ned. "But you can't take up the papers nowadays without finding a lot about oil in them. There was a time when cotton was king. A little later steel was king. But to-day oil is king. Who's the richest man in the world to-day? An oil man. What's at the bottom of half the squabbles between nations nowadays? The fight for the possession of oil fields. England wants control of the oil fields in Persia and Mesopotamia. The Dutch are shutting out all foreigners from the Djambi fields. Soviet Russia expects to get enough money from her oil-well concessions to run the Government. So it goes all over the world. Oil is king. Look at the demand for it. See how automobiles are being manufactured by the millions. See how it has taken the place of coal for fuel in our own battleships and the great ocean liners. See how the great office buildings in various cities are using it in place of coal."

"There's millions in it, eh?" laughed Tom.

"Billions, trillions," corrected Ned. "But now let's get down to brass tacks and look over these specifications. Something tells me that we've got to watch our step in dealing with these men. Of course, they may be all right at that, but——" and he left his sentence unfinished.

"I don't care much for that fellow Hankinshaw for a fact," remarked Tom. "Once or

twice I'd have liked to throw him out of the room."

"He a little bit more than annoyed me, too," assented Ned. "I wish he'd get another brand of tobacco."

"Bless my appetite!" remarked Mr. Damon, as he looked at his watch. "I'll be late for dinner and let myself in for a scolding. So long, folks," and with a hurried handshake he was off.

Left to themselves, Tom, his father, and Ned put their heads together in close study of the specifications for the oil-well machinery. Although Mr. Swift had not been physically strong for years, his mind was as keen as ever and he was of invaluable service to the others, both of whom valued his opinion highly.

They sat long in conference, which was interrupted by dinner, to which Ned stayed. After the meal another hour of discussion ensued, at the end of which they had a pretty clear idea of the terms they would offer to the oil prospectors. There were some details left for Ned to look up on the following day, including an investigation as to the financial standing of the oil men, but the main features of their offer were practically settled.

"Well, that's that," remarked Tom, as Ned rose to go. "Wait a minute, Ned, and I'll get

out the car and drop you at your house. I'm going up your way, anyhow."

"Yes," said Ned drily, as he looked out of the window. "I notice that it's a beautiful moonlight night. And I remember that Mary Nestor lives on the same street just a little way beyond our house."

"What an acute mind you have," laughed Tom. "I'd hate to have you on my trail if I'd committed a crime. Come along now and don't be envious."

It is possible that Mary Nestor had noticed too that it was a beautiful moonlight night and barely possible that the thought had occurred to her that a certain young inventor might happen along that way. What is certain is that she was dressed most becomingly, that her cheeks had a pink flush in them, and that her eyes were uncommonly bright as she opened the door in response to his ring.

"Why, Tom, what a pleasant surprise," she said.

"It's too fine a night to be indoors, Mary," said Tom, as he held her hand a little longer than was absolutely necessary. "What do you say to a spin along the lake road? Just for an hour or so."

"I'll be glad to," answered Mary. "Come

into the living room and see father and mother for a moment while I get my hat on."

She ushered him into the room and then ran upstairs while Tom greeted her parents. He was a great favorite with them, and they welcomed him warmly. They chatted together for a few minutes until Mary came down. Then, with a promise not to be gone too long, the young people went out to the car.

The moonlight flooded the roads, making them almost as bright as in the day. There was just a light breeze that blew little wisps of hair about Mary's face in a way that made her seem more bewitching than ever. It was a night when it was good to be young and to be alive.

"On such a night——" murmured Tom, as the car purred smoothly along.

"Going to quote Shakespeare?" inquired Mary mischievously.

"Not exactly," laughed Tom. "Mary," he said, "listen. I——"

But what he wanted Mary to listen to could not be told at the moment, for just then a big touring car came plunging around a bend in the road and came tearing down toward them.

CHAPTER V

A CLOSE SHAVE

The big machine came thundering along at a reckless pace, not attempting to keep to the right, but holding to the middle of the road. At the same time Tom and Mary could hear the sound of boisterous singing from the people in the car. It was evidently a party out for a "joy ride" and totally careless of the rights of others.

There was a cry of fright from Mary as the car kept on its course as if determined to ride them down. Tom turned the wheel sharply, so sharply in fact that his car went into a little ditch at the side of the road. At the same instant the bigger machine whizzed past, the driver grinning at the way he had crowded the other car off.

Tom was boiling over with indignation. If he had not had Mary with him, he would have turned and pursued the other car and never stopped until he had thrashed the driver or landed him in jail.

"The scoundrel!" he cried. "That fellow was little better than a murderer. If I could lay my

hands on him I'd make him sorry that he'd ever been born."

"There, there, Tom," said Mary soothingly, though she was still trembling. "Let's be thankful we're alive. If you hadn't been as quick as you were we would both have been killed."

It took a few minutes and considerable maneuvering to get the car out of the ditch, but at last they were on the road again, and under the influence of Mary's presence, Tom's wrath finally simmered down. After all, they were safe and together and nothing else mattered.

"You don't know what a change has taken place in our home since father came back from that foreign trip," remarked Mary. "It's like a different place. He is so much improved and more cheerful that it seems as if a ton's weight had been removed from our hearts. Mother goes about her work singing, and as for myself I'm happy beyond words."

"That cranky old doctor knew his business, though it was like drawing teeth to get him to examine your father," replied Tom. "It was an inspiration to send him abroad."

"It might have been inspiration that sent him, but it took a young inventor named Tom Swift to bring him back," said Mary. "I shudder yet to think of what might have happened if it hadn't been for your courage and daring."

"Oh, that was nothing," answered Tom. "Any one else could have done the same if they'd had my facilities. I just happened to own an airplane that could do anything one asked of it. And the old bus certainly did herself proud."

"The old bus, as you call it, wouldn't have done anything if it hadn't been for its pilot," asserted Mary. "Everybody knows that. But you're so painfully modest that I suppose you'd never own up to it, any more than you'd own up to what you did to-day."

"What did I do to-day?" parried Tom.

"Oh, nothing," laughed Mary. "Only saved a man from dying. Only set a broken leg as skillfully as a surgeon could do it. Apart from little trifles like that you didn't do anything. I'd like to know what you would call a really good day's work."

"Ned Newton and Garret Jackson had as much to do with that as I did, Mary. But how did you come to hear about it, anyway?"

"Dr. Sherwood dropped in to see father early this evening," was the answer. "You know they're old friends. He thinks you ought to be a doctor."

"I guess I'll stick to invention and manufacturing for a while yet," answered Tom, grinning. "Especially as I'm up to my neck in business. Everything's humming down at the works. New

contract came in to-day. At least I think it will be a contract if we can come to terms on prices. Going to give my answer to-morrow."

"Tell me about it," urged Mary.

"Oh, it's for the making of some oil-well machinery," answered Tom. "It's something new for us, but we've got the facilities and can manage it all right. Mr. Damon brought the men to us, and I think it may result in a pretty big deal."

"I wonder if they were the men I saw in Mr. Damon's car when they passed our house to-day," said Mary, with heightened interest.

"Likely enough," answered Tom carelessly. "There were three of them."

"Two tall ones and one fat stodgy one?" asked Mary.

"That's right," replied Tom. "But why the sudden interest? Do you happen to know any of them?"

Mary did not answer.

Tom looked at her in some surprise.

"Did you hear my question?" he asked.

"I don't know any of them," answered Mary.

There was something in her tone that piqued Tom's curiosity.

"Come, Mary, out with it," he urged. "You're concealing something. Let me know what it is."

"I'm sorry I spoke," said Mary reluctantly.

"I was right when I said that I didn't know any of them. But one of them spoke to me in town to-day and tried to strike up an acquaintance. Of course, I froze him and got away from him as fast as I could."

"The hound!" cried Tom furiously. "Which one of them was it? I'll have his hide!"

"It was the fat, coarse one," replied Mary. "I don't know his name."

"Hankinshaw!" cried Tom. "The low brute! Just wait till I can lay my hands on him!"

"Now, Tom, you must promise me not to do anything rash," pleaded Mary, laying her hand on his arm. "There's been no real harm done, and I squelched him so hard that I guess he'll never annoy me again. It would only give me unpleasant publicity if you attempted to punish him. And then, too, I don't want anything to be done that may interfere with your business deal."

"What do you suppose I care for the business deal?" exclaimed Tom. "If that were the only thing concerned, I'd go to him and thrash him within an inch of his life. I disliked the fellow from the minute I saw him, anyway, and if I'd known what I know now I'd have bundled him out of the house neck and heels."

"I wish I'd held my tongue," sighed the girl. "But don't you see, Tom, that if you did any-

thing now it would hurt me more than any one else?"

Tom did see, and reluctantly relinquished his desire to inflict summary punishment on the fellow, though he fumed inwardly and vowed to himself that he would keep a close watch on the cad during the rest of his stay in Shopton.

Suddenly a thought struck him.

"Do you know," he said, "that speaking of that rascal has reminded me of something? When that road hog nearly crashed into us just now, I thought there was something familiar in his face, but I couldn't just place him. Now I think I know. I'll bet it was Hankinshaw."

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Mary. "I was so frightened that I couldn't be sure, but in the glimpse I got of that repulsive face there seemed to be something I had seen before. I believe you're right. He's just the type of man to do that sort of thing."

"Another thing added to his account," said Tom grimly. "Something tells me that some day Mr. Hankinshaw and I will have a reckoning. And it won't be exactly a pleasant day for him either."

"Oh, well, let's talk of something more pleasant," said Mary, trying to get the young inventor out of his angry mood. "Do you know, Tom, I was greatly interested when you spoke about oil?

It seems to me to be about the most important thing in the world."

"Funny," replied Tom. "That's just what Ned Newton was saying to-day. I've been so busy with my inventions that I haven't paid much attention to it myself."

"I shouldn't wonder if you would find that one of the most profitable things to devote your inventive genius to," was the answer. "Father was saying the other day that there wasn't a thing hardly with which oil wasn't connected in some way or other. This car in which we are riding couldn't run without oil and couldn't be driven without gasoline. The same is true of the airplane in which you were flying this afternoon. Even on the farm the tractors are being driven by it. We women wouldn't know what to do without naphtha and gasoline to remove spots. It's in everything from the smallest to the biggest."

"Almost thou persuadest me," laughed Tom. "At any rate, I'm going to make a thorough study of the subject, and perhaps I may hit on something that will be worth while in the way of invention."

"I'm sure you will," replied Mary warmly. "You never yet have gone at a thing with all your heart but what you have succeeded in it."

They had a delightful ride, despite the un-

pleasant feature that had intruded upon it at the start, and Tom had to let out his car to the fullest speed to get Mary back home at the time he had promised.

The next day was a busy one at the Swift Construction works. Tom was buried deep in the technical details of the machinery, and his father helped greatly with his assistance and advice. Already ideas of improvements were thronging in Tom's active mind and he grew more and more interested as his study progressed.

Ned, too, was active in preparing his figures and estimates. He had been busy with the telegraph inquiring into the financial standing and responsibility of the oil men, and while these were not absolutely satisfactory, they were sufficiently good to warrant taking a reasonable chance, though they indicated the need of caution.

Late in the afternoon Tom and Ned came together for a preliminary conference.

"Well, how goes the battle, Ned?" asked Tom, as he settled into his office chair.

"I've got everything ready," replied Ned, as he pointed to a mass of papers on his desk.

"Good!" was the reply. "As regards the time limit," went on Tom, "I've consulted with Jackson and we figure that we can complete the job in six weeks. Of course, we could do it sooner,

if we put the whole force on it, but we've got to take care of the contracts we have on hand."

"As regards the price, we can do it at a fair profit for twenty-six thousand dollars," said the financial man.

"Do you think they're good for it?" asked Tom thoughtfully.

"I think we can take a chance," answered Ned. "The references weren't exactly what you could call gilt-edged, but as regards Thompson and Bragden, they were fairly good. As to Hankinshaw——"

"The skunk!" muttered Tom.

"What's that?" asked Ned, looking up.

"Nothing," answered Tom. "I was just thinking out loud. Go ahead."

"As to Hankinshaw," Ned went on, "replies weren't so good. He seems to have been mixed up in some shady deals. Went bankrupt once under suspicious circumstances. But he seems to be a minor figure in the deal. Thompson seems to be the king pin. To make things safer, however, we'll demand a substantial cash payment on the signing of the contract and other payments while the work is in progress. That will cover us as we go along, and we can't be stung to any extent. Take it altogether, my advice is that we conclude the deal, if they agree

to our stipulations. And I think they will, for they've doubtless figured the matter out and they'll know that our figures are right. Of course, they'll try to reduce them, but we'll stand pat. That is, of course, if you agree."

"I'll leave that all to you, Ned," replied Tom. "Anything that you say goes. They can take it or leave it at our figures."

CHAPTER VI

SUSPICIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES

"GEMMUN to see you, sah."

With his very best bow, Rad ushered the three men into the office of the Swift works that evening, where Tom, his father, and Ned were waiting to receive them.

"You see, Koku," Rad had said patronizingly, when he had been directed by Tom to be at the office in case he were needed for any errands, "Marse Tom knows who to count on when he wants anything what takes 'telligence. Yo's all right when it comes to muscle, but when brains is needed yo's certainly not dar."

"Could break your back like that," glowered Koku, snapping his fingers.

"Sho, sho," agreed Rad hurriedly, retreating a little. "So cud a g'rilla. But what brains has a g'rilla got? Huh. Nuffin at all. Et's brains, Koku, brains whut counts, I'm tellin' you."

Tom, who had overheard the controversy, mollified the giant by directing him to watch over

the visitors' car and see that no one got away with it, and peace was reëstablished for the time.

The visitors offered to shake hands. Tom thus greeted Thompson and Bragden, but when Hankinshaw also held out his hand Tom was very busy with some papers and did not seem to see it.

"Well," said Thompson, when cigars had been lighted, though Hankinshaw clung to his malodorous pipe, "how about those figures? Let's know the worst. You'll remember what I said about cutting them to the bone."

"There wouldn't be much nourishment for us if we didn't leave some meat on them," remarked Tom, with a smile; "but we've cut as close as we can and yet leave ourselves a reasonable profit. Mr. Newton has the figures. Go ahead, Ned."

Ned handed to each of the three men a duplicate sheet of the proposed contract.

"Those are our figures," he said. "As you see, we make the total sum twenty-six thousand dollars."

"Twenty-six thousand dollars!" exclaimed Thompson, with a well simulated start of surprise, while Bragden held up his hands as though calling on heaven to witness the outrageous price.

"That's the figure," said Ned firmly, "and if you've done any calculating at all you must know that they are reasonable."

"Looks as though you were trying to bleed us white," growled Hankinshaw.

"We don't bleed anybody," put in Tom coldly. "Our reputation in the trade is too valuable for us to indulge in any such tactics."

"I should think that twenty thousand dollars would have been the extreme outside price," objected Thompson.

"We can't go below our figures," said Ned. "Our first price is our best and our only price. That's the fixed policy of the Company."

"What do you say to splitting the difference and making it twenty-three thousand?" suggested Bragden.

Ned shook his head.

"Twenty-six thousand stands," he said. "Of course, you're under no obligation to accept these terms if you think they're too high. But that's the best we can do."

"You gentlemen may wish to talk the matter over among yourselves," suggested Tom. "If so, you can step into the adjoining office where you'll have privacy."

The visitors filed off into the other room where an animated conversation ensued. Thompson and Bragden kept their voices lowered, but every now and then Hankinshaw could be heard growling and objurgating, while his partners tried to quiet him.

In a little while they returned and resumed their seats.

"We still think the figures are too high," Thompson announced; "but in view of your unyielding attitude and the fact that we are in a hurry to get to work, we have decided reluctantly to accept them. As to the time limit, six weeks perhaps will be all right, provided we can depend on the material being ready at that time."

"It'll be ready on the dot," Tom assured him.

"Of course, your figures include delivery at the station in Texas that we shall designate," Thompson went on.

"Not at all," replied Ned. "If you will look at your contract again, you will see that it is clearly stated that those prices are f. o. b. Shopton."

"Scalping us like regular Indians," snarled Hankinshaw.

Thompson silenced him with a look. A long debate ensued, which ended with Ned's carrying his point.

"Now there's one other point," said Thompson. "How about this proviso that five thousand of the amount shall be paid down on the signing of the contract? It doesn't seem to me that that is necessary or usual."

"It's usual enough in an affair of this size," replied Ned. "It's only a matter of prudence or

self-protection. You must realize, Mr. Thompson, that our acquaintance has been of very short duration and that we have never done business with you before. We have no doubt, of course, that everything is all right. There is nothing personal in this. It is just a matter of ordinary business precaution and procedure. This is a new line of work for us, and we shall have to incur a large initial expense for new tools that we have not hitherto required. Under the circumstances, therefore, we shall have to require that five thousand be paid down on the signing of the contract, five thousand more two weeks from now, five thousand four weeks from now and the balance on completion of the work. If you were building a house you would have to make some arrangement of the kind. We are asking nothing more of you than we do of others who are doing business with us for the first time."

"I should think that Mr. Damon's recommendation would have been sufficient," grumbled Hankinshaw.

"Mr. Damon's acquaintance was limited to Mr. Thompson, and I gathered was not very intimate," replied Ned. "I guess we'll have to leave him out of this."

Hankinshaw was for continuing the argument, but the more astute Thompson, who saw that extended controversy on this point was liable to

convey the impression that their financial responsibility was not what it should be, yielded the point.

"You certainly are a hard-boiled lot," he said, with an attempt at jocularity. "But I guess you have us where you want us and that we'll have to sign on the dotted line. That is," he added, looking at his companions, "if my partners agree."

They nodded, Bragden reluctantly and Hankinshaw scowlingly.

Tom and his father affixed their signatures, which were followed by those of the three visitors.

"Well, now that that's settled," remarked Thompson, as he rose from his chair, "I guess we'll have to be getting along. Mr. Bragden and I have to get the night train. Mr. Hankinshaw will stay here for a while to take care of our interests and keep an eye on the work."

"Just a moment," put in Ned. "That matter of the initial check for five thousand."

"Oh, yes," said Thompson. "How careless of me to overlook that. If you'll hand me that pen, I'll fix it up."

He took out a check book and wrote a check for five thousand dollars.

"There you are," he said, handing it to Ned with a flourish.

Ned scanned it closely.

"The amount is all right," he said, after an instant, "but the date is wrong. You've got it the 27th of May, while this is only the 21st."

"Sure enough," replied Thompson, with an air of vexation, as he looked at it. "I made it the 21st, but there must have been a hair on the pen and that made it a seven. Tear that one up and I'll make you out another. And this time I'll see that the pen is clean."

He rubbed the pen carefully and made out another check that was correct. Ned examined it, folded it and put it in his pocket.

"The receipt of this is already acknowledged in the contract," he reminded Thompson, and the latter nodded.

The visitors said good-night and took their leave, Rad opening the door for them with a profound bow that put such a crick in his back that he had hard work straightening up again.

"Well, Ned," said Tom, "I have to hand it to you for the way you carried your points. You're all wool and a yard wide as a business man."

"You surely are, Ned," agreed Tom's father warmly. "You and Tom make a good team, he for the inventive and you for the financial end of the business. But now, as I'm pretty tired, I guess I'll go over to the house and take Rad along."

"All right, Dad," said Tom. "I'll be over before long. Hope you'll get a good night's sleep."

"I shall if that tooth will let me," and Mr. Swift smiled faintly. He had been having a great deal of trouble with his teeth.

"Better see a dentist in the morning and have it out if it doesn't behave."

"I guess that is what I'll have to do, Tom."

"Tom, the next thing for you to invent will be a painless tooth-pulling machine," remarked Ned.

"Sounds fine," returned Mr. Swift, with a smile, and then passed out.

Left alone, the young men looked at each other.

"On the level now, Ned, what do you think of those birds?" asked Tom.

"I should call them eels instead of birds," replied Ned. "They strike me as being just about as slippery as they come. It was all right, of course, trying to get better terms. That was just what any business men would do. But that matter of the check looked fishy to me. In the first place, he didn't forget about it as he pretended to do. Men don't forget a thing like that."

"What do you suppose his idea was?" asked Tom.

"Just to get out of reach before we thought of it. Then perhaps he thought that we'd go on

with the work anyway so as to lose no time, since we've got to get it through in six weeks. We'd have to correspond with him about it, and he could palter and delay until we'd got so far along with the work that we'd go on with it anyway. And then when I nailed him down to it, did you see how he post-dated the check? Hair on the pen! Tell that to the marines. The idea was to make the check no good until nearly a week had passed. That would keep their money in the bank a week longer, or if they haven't got the money now to meet it, they'd have a week to get the funds together to meet it when presented. They may be operating on a shoestring, anyway.

"Then, too, the check is on a San Francisco bank. That may be all right, but in the natural course of exchange it will take nearly a week to collect it. There again we'd be supposed to be well on our way with the work, so far in fact that we couldn't back out. But they'll get slipped up if they're trying any funny business there, for I'll telegraph the first thing to-morrow morning to find out whether the check is good, and you'd better not do a stroke of work on the contract until we're sure it is."

"I'm almost sorry we've undertaken the work," said Tom.

"I'm not," replied Ned. "Of course, it's much more comfortable to feel that we're dealing with

perfectly responsible people, but we've got the thing sewed up so that we can't lose, anyway. They might like to cheat us, but they can't. In the first place, we won't spend a penny until we're absolutely sure of five thousand dollars. That will cover everything until the next payment comes due two weeks from now. If they renege then, we'll stop and be money in pocket. If they pay, we'll have received ten thousand dollars. The payments after that they'll have to make, anyway, for they will already have paid more than they can afford to lose. We've got them every way.

"Then, too, we've got a nice little profit in this proposition. It may also open up a new line that will be big in possibilities. You know already what I think of oil. The demand already for oil-well machinery is greater than the supply, and I know of some factories that are running three shifts and working the whole twenty-four hours to keep up with their orders. With the new oil fields that are being opened up, that demand is bound to increase, and there's no reason why we shouldn't get our share of the business. This first order will perhaps set us on the road to doing this. Then, too, I'm banking on your inventing something new that will be so good that every oil field will have to have it. You've never

tackled anything yet that you haven't improved upon."

"Thanks for the bouquet," said Tom, grinning.

"No bouquet at all," answered Ned. "It's the simple truth, and you know it."

"Well," said Tom, "I'll do my best. I feel the old urge coming on, and I'm hankering to get at it. There's just one thing that's bothering me now."

"What's that?" asked Ned.

"Hankinshaw," replied Tom.

CHAPTER VII

TROUBLE BREWING

NED stopped in his work of gathering up his papers and looked inquiringly at Tom.

"Hankinshaw!" he repeated. "What about him? What have you got against him outside of his smoking vile tobacco?"

"A good deal," answered Tom emphatically. "He's just about as popular with me as a rattlesnake at a picnic party."

"Why the snake?" asked Ned quizzically. "I'm not much of an authority on natural history, but I'd call him an old crab and let it go at that. What has he done especially that peeves you?"

"Several things," replied Tom, who did not care to mention Mary's name and tell of the annoyance she had experienced. "For one thing, I'm pretty sure that he was driving a machine last night that nearly sent me to kingdom come. Hogged the road and made me go into a ditch. Then grinned like a gargoyle as he whizzed past.

I tell you for a minute I saw red, and it's a lucky thing for him that I didn't get my hands on him."

"I imagine that's the type of fellow he is," said Ned. "I don't wonder that you felt like beating him up. Sorry that Thompson or Bragden didn't stop over to look after the work instead of him. They may be no better than he is at heart, but at least they have the manners of gentlemen. But, after all, it will be for only a few weeks, and we'll try to make the best of it."

The next day Ned telegraphed to the California bank, and to his satisfaction learned that the check was good.

"It's all right," he told Tom.

"Then I'll go ahead," said the young inventor. "I'll start in right away and order the material we need, and I'll get busy gathering all the information on oil-well machinery and trying to improve on it. No more car rides or airplane spins, or anything else, for a while. Here's where I shed my coat and work night and day. Watch my smoke."

The next week was one of intense energy and application for the young inventor. He had the gift of losing himself in his work, especially when that work interested him. And the further he went into the subject the greater the grip it got upon him. His enthusiasm grew as he

plunged into the fascinating study of the tremendous riches in oil that the earth held beneath its surface. Soon he was absorbed in it as in a thrilling romance. He traced the gradual steps by which men of all climes and in all ages had sought to possess themselves of this marvelous wealth stored in nature's caverns and only yielded up reluctantly.

"Do you know," he said one night to Ned, as they sat discussing the matter in the office, "that the Chinese were the pioneers in the matter of oil-well digging?"

"No, I didn't," replied Ned. "But I'm not surprised. Those old Chinamen seem to have started most of the things we've improved on later. There's gunpowder and the compass and a raft of other things."

"Well, digging for oil was one of them," said Tom. "And the principles they applied underlie the methods we're using to-day. Of course, they didn't use steam power, and that's where we've got the bulge on them. They worked by man power, and their apparatus was laughably crude when compared with ours, yet their methods were strikingly similar to those we're using now or have been using very recently."

"For instance?" said Ned, with a lifting of the eyebrows.

"Well, take their springboard arrangement,"

replied Tom. "The cutting tool, or bit, was suspended in the hole by means of a rattan cable, and the required movement was given to it by a springboard. When a coolie jumped on the board, it raised the bit; when he relieved it of his weight the bit fell and cut its way downward. A drum with a vertical shaft, around which oxen traveled in a circle, coiled the cable and lifted the drill out of the hole when they wanted to bail out the hole or change tools. The bailer was made of a section of bamboo, and that material was also used for tubing and casing and pipe lines.

"Now, this springboard was very similar in action and function to the springpole which we've used here in America, chiefly at first for drilling brine wells. It was used, too, in drilling the first oil well of the California fields."

"But they've given that up now, haven't they?" asked Ned.

"Sure they have," was the answer. "The walking beam, which is the biggest piece of timber in the present-day drilling rig, has taken its place. And, of course, that's now operated by steam instead of manual labor. But my point is that the old springboard process of the Chinese and the springpole method that we've used till recently are fundamentally based on the same thing—the percussion process."

"We've got a long way from that now, I imagine," remarked Ned.

"We have and we haven't," replied Tom. "Percussion is still in common use in a great many wells, especially when they're not supposed to go very deep and where the rocks are of comparatively soft stone. But where these conditions don't exist, the rotary method is often employed. In that case two strings of pipe are used, one to wall up the hole, while the other with the drill attached is rotated inside of it. An important thing in connection with this method is that a circulation of thick mud pumped through the drill stem will support the walls of the hole until the well is completed, provided it isn't too deep. It's being used a lot now in the Texas fields, and I'm looking into it thoroughly. I tell you, old boy, it's a fascinating study."

"That's the way I like to hear you talk," said Ned, with a smile. "Once you get interested in a thing, you'll never stop until you improve on it. I'll bet a year's salary that before a month's over, you'll have invented something that will set the country talking."

"Don't risk your money so recklessly," laughed Tom.

"I'm not rash," replied Ned. "As a matter of fact, such a wager wouldn't be sportsmanlike, for I'd be betting on a sure thing."

Although Tom's time had been taken up so fully day and night with the contract he had on hand and the new invention he was evolving, he had not forgotten or neglected the unfortunate airman whom he and his friends had saved from death.

Several times each week he called up the hospital by telephone to learn how the patient was progressing. And he had requested Mrs. Baggert, the housekeeper of the Swift home, to send fruit, jellies and other delicacies to the sufferer, a task which that warm-hearted woman undertook gladly.

"Come along, Ned," said Tom one afternoon. "Let's jump into the roadster and go up to the hospital. I want to see for myself how the poor fellow is getting along. Those 'phone calls are usually answered by the secretary, and she's rather hazy in her reports. I want to have a talk with Doctor Sherwood himself. Nothing like going right to headquarters."

Ned looked rather dubiously at a pile of papers on his desk.

"I'd like to," he said, "but——"

Tom laughed, picked up Ned's hat, jammed it on his friend's head, and yanked him out of his office chair.

"You've got such winning ways, I can't resist you," observed Ned, surrendering with a grin.

In a few minutes they were at the hospital. In the hall they met Dr. Sherwood, who was just coming out of one of the wards. He greeted them heartily.

"I can guess what you've come for," he remarked. "I wish I had more cheerful news for you about that poor fellow you brought here. But it's proved to be a more serious case than I thought at first it would be. The fractured leg is mending all right, but his head's in a bad way. It's a case of brain concussion. He must have hit his head pretty hard when he dived into the tree. Most of the time he's unconscious or semi-conscious, and his temperature stays high."

"You don't think he'll die, do you?" asked Tom anxiously.

"No-o," replied the doctor slowly, "I hardly think so. Still, you can't tell. He's a mighty sick man. But come along with me and you can see him."

They followed him on tiptoe into one of the rooms. But they did not need to be so careful, for the young man with flushed face and disordered hair who lay on the cot was wholly oblivious to their presence. He was babbling in delirium, and there was no intelligence in the eyes whose restless glances passed over the visitors as though they were not there.

It was a saddening sight, and as the boys could be of no service they quickly took their leave.

"No clue to his identity yet?" asked Tom of the doctor, who had accompanied them out on the steps of the hospital.

"No," was the reply. "Lots of people have looked at him without recognizing him. We've had many letters from all parts of the country from people who had read of the accident and thought the young fellow might be a missing son or some other relative. But he doesn't answer to any of the descriptions given. And he himself hasn't been in a condition to tell us who he is."

"That young fellow certainly got a rough deal," remarked Ned, as he and Tom walked away. "Think of his suffering like that and being all alone—I mean as far as his folks are concerned."

"Yes, Ned, and think of his folks, if he has any. How they must be worrying about him."

"Queer he didn't have some sort of tag on his clothing. Most aviators wear them."

"So they do. But fellows get careless. I suppose he forgot all about it."

The next week was a busy one for Tom. During the evenings he was engrossed in the study of everything he could find that bore in the most remote degree on the subject of oil and oil wells.

He had already a very extensive scientific and mechanical library, but in addition he wrote and wired to learned societies and Government bureaus for their latest bulletins and reports. These were soon coming in to him by every mail, and he devoured them with an insatiable appetite. Any one looking over from the house could see the light burning in his office till long after midnight.

And every night when Tom at last put out the light and stepped outside, he saw either a very slight or a very massive figure waiting to accompany him over the short distance that lay between the office and the house. One night it would be Rad and the next night Koku. Those two had had many wrangles on the subject of who should guard their idolized master, and had finally compromised on taking turns.

Tom at first had laughed and then scolded, but to no purpose.

"You nebber kin tell, Marse Tom," Rad had said, shaking his woolly head, when Tom remonstrated with him, "w'en somebuddy might cum nosin' an spifflicatin' roun' here w'en you's busy wid yo' wuk; an' ef dey does, dey's goin' to fin' 'Radicate Sampson right on de job. Nussah, nussah, Marse Tom, dey ain't no use argifyin'. 'Ah stays heah while you stays heah."

Koku was less voluble, but no less devoted.

"Me sleep when you sleep," he said simply.

Faced with such loyalty, Tom could do nothing but surrender.

The days were no less busy than the nights, though in another way. Tom spent hours with Garret Jackson, the manager of the mechanical department of the works. He was a first-class mechanic, clear-headed and forward looking, and had been with the Swift Construction Company for years. Tom had not only the greatest respect for his ability, but also implicit confidence in his discretion. Again and again it had been necessary for Tom to entrust him with secrets of his inventions while he was having special machinery made, and he had never betrayed his trust. Repeatedly Tom thanked his stars that he had two such faithful coworkers as Ned Newton in the financial end and Garret Jackson in the mechanical part of his business.

As a result of his conferences with Jackson, it was not long before a high fence began to be constructed in a rather remote section of the plant. Many curious glances were cast at it as it went up, enclosing an area of about a hundred feet square. What it was intended for only a few knew, and the cold stare of Jackson when any one hinted at a question soon discouraged the inquisitive.

It was just verging on dusk one night, when

Tom, coming back from the post-office, passed the one large confectionery store which the town of Shopton possessed. He glanced carelessly through the window and saw that the store contained two customers, a man and a girl. The latter, who was a trifle out of the direct line of Tom's vision, was edging away from the man, who seemed to be annoying her. The man followed and laid his hand on her arm.

The girl threw it off and faced him indignantly. As she did so, Tom saw that it was Mary!

In a flash he was in the store.

CHAPTER VIII

THROUGH THE WINDOW

Tom, having so suddenly burst into the store, grabbed the man by the collar and whirled him about so that the two were face to face. It was Hankinshaw.

"What do you mean by that?" sputtered Hankinshaw, as he tried to wrench himself loose from the strangle hold that Tom had on him, his face fairly apoplectic with rage.

"It's up to me to ask you what you mean by daring to bother this young lady," responded Tom, in a low tense voice while his eyes glinted like steel. "He was annoying you, wasn't he, Mary?"

"Yes, he was," replied Mary excitedly. "And, oh, Tom, I'm so glad you came! But please, Tom," she added more calmly, "don't make a scene. Let's get out of here as soon as possible."

Tom relinquished his hold on Hankinshaw's collar.

"You're right, Mary," he agreed. "His case

can wait till another time. But it's only your being here that saves him from getting the thrashing of his life."

"Huh!" snorted Hankinshaw, who, while not quite as tall as Tom, was much bulkier and heavier. "That's easy enough to say. Talk is cheap. What do you suppose I'd be doing while you were trying to mess me up?"

"Nothing much," retorted Tom drily. "That will be enough from you, Hankinshaw. Give me your parcels, Mary, and I'll see you home."

"The nerve of you to lay your hands on me!" snarled Hankinshaw, who was getting angrier and angrier. "I've a good mind to have you arrested for assault and battery."

"Try it," recommended Tom. "It would be a good chance to show you up for what you are. Come along, Mary."

"Gallant knight with his fair lady," sneered Hankinshaw.

"What's that?" exclaimed Tom, taking a step toward him.

Before the blaze in the young inventor's eyes, Hankinshaw stepped back hastily. As he did so, his foot struck a box on the floor and he fell backward and went through the confectioner's window. There was a crash of splintering glass, and the next instant Hankinshaw was on the sidewalk, surrounded by a litter of glass and a score

or more of candy boxes that had been flung out with him.

"Oh, I do hope he isn't hurt!" cried Mary, in a fright.

"I guess not," replied Tom, as they hurried outside. "You go along, Mary, before a crowd gathers. I'll stay behind to help him if necessary."

The confectioner had rushed outside with them, in alarm both for his window and the man who had gone through it. Mary hastened on, while Tom and the store owner, a Mr. Wilkins, helped Hankinshaw to his feet.

To their relief, they saw that apart from a few scratches on one of his hands and the damage to his dignity, no harm had come to the bulky fellow. But his eyes were baleful as he glared at Tom. If hate could have killed, Tom would have been a dead man.

"I'll fix you for this, Swift!" he declared venomously.

"You brought it on yourself," replied Tom. "I'm glad though that you weren't seriously injured. You'd better get back to your hotel before a crowd gathers. It wouldn't be pleasant for you to explain just how you happened to go through the window. Don't worry about the glass, Wilkins," he continued, turning to the confectioner. "If he doesn't pay for it, I will. And

mind, Wilkins, not a word as to the young lady who was in the store at the time this happened."

"You can count on me, Mr. Swift," replied the storekeeper, reassured by what Tom had said about the broken window. "Nobody'll get anything out of me."

It was lucky that the accident had occurred at a time when most of the people of the town were at supper and the streets were almost deserted. Some had gathered, however, attracted by the crash, and more were coming, and to avoid questioning Tom went off quickly toward his home. Hankinshaw after a moment of hesitation started off for his hotel, not caring to have others see him in his awkward and humiliating position.

The first thing Tom did on reaching the house was to take up the telephone and call up Mary. There was a tremor in her musical voice as she answered.

"Oh, Tom," she said, "I'm so glad to hear from you. I've been worried to death ever since I left you. Was the man badly hurt?"

"Only a few trifling scratches," replied Tom. "The fellow got off better than he deserved. The last I saw of him he was hot-footing it for his hotel. What he'd like to do to me is a sin and a shame."

"Do be careful, Tom," urged Mary anxiously. "He had the look in his eyes of a sneak. I'm

afraid that in some underhand way he may do you an injury. I've been worrying, too, for fear it may affect the business deal you have with him and his partners."

"Not a chance," laughed Tom. "He couldn't back out now without being a loser, and he and his crowd are too canny for that. Not that I'd care a bit if he did. I'm half sorry we took the contract, anyway. If we hadn't, this Hankinshaw wouldn't be hanging around Shopton. But thank goodness the work is getting pretty well along now, and in a few weeks the contract will be completed. Then he'll be nothing but a bad dream—perhaps I ought to say a nightmare. Don't worry your pretty head any more about it."

"But keep away from him all you can, won't you?" pleaded Mary.

"I guess he'll keep away from me," laughed Tom. "But I'll promise you, if that will make you feel better."

Tom's prediction proved correct. For several days Hankinshaw did not appear at all at the works. And even when he resumed his visits they were brief and less frequent than usual, and he avoided meeting Tom as much as possible.

In the meantime, the high board fence around a section of the grounds of the plant had been completed. Material of various kinds had been carried in and set up by a group of chosen work-

men under the close supervision of Jackson. Gradually a structure arose that would have seemed strange to the eyes of the people of Shopton, though familiar enough to dwellers in the oil fields of California, Oklahoma and Texas.

Tom was building an oil derrick and getting together a full paraphernalia of cables, drills and other tools necessary in oil-well digging. Everything was on a miniature scale to save expense, for the structure was only designed to be temporary and would be demolished when the need for it had passed.

"Aren't you going to a good deal of trouble and expense for this one job?" asked Ned, a little anxiously. "It won't take much to eat up all the profit there is on this contract."

"Don't worry, old boy," replied Tom. "If this one contract were the only thing concerned, this wouldn't be necessary, for all we have to do is to follow the specifications of their plan. But I'm doing this for a different reason. This isn't for the benefit of Thompson, Bragden and Hankinshaw, but for trying out something new for the Swift Construction Company. Do you get me?"

"Do you mean that you've hit on a new invention?" asked Ned eagerly.

"Something like that," answered Tom with a smile. "Not that I'd call it an invention—yet.

I've got a whole lot of things to work out in connection with it. But the idea I've struck seems feasible enough as far as I've gone. I'm getting rid of the technical difficulties one after the other, and the farther I go, the more convinced I am that I'm on the right track. But nobody knows better than you that there's a long step between theory and practice. The thing that seems perfect in the study may prove to be a flivver in the field. That's the reason why I'm rigging up this miniature oil-well outfit. I want to put my idea to a practical test. Maybe it'll work. Maybe it won't. If it doesn't, I'll discard it and hunt up something better."

"Go to it, Tom, and good luck to you," cried Ned enthusiastically. "I'd have bet my life you'd hit on something new."

"Hold your horses," cautioned Tom. "The best laid plans sometimes 'gang agley.' I'm a long way off yet from certainty. But I'm far enough along to justify this expense to find out whether I'm right or wrong."

So the work went on until the structure was complete, and any one who entered the gates of the carefully guarded enclosure would have rubbed his eyes and wondered how long it was since Shopton became an oil field.

The most prominent object was the derrick, or rig, a frame-work tower wide at the bottom

and tapering off at the top. This was for the purpose of carrying two pulleys, the crown pulley in the center and the block through which the sand line ran. Over the crown pulley ran the cable by which the drilling tools were suspended or lowered or raised. At one side of the rig was the bull wheel, or windlass, upon which the cable was wound, and at the other was the walking beam, a heavy timber hung in the center so that it could undulate up and down.

Then there was a choice collection of drilling tools, consisting of a bit, an auger-stem, a sinker bar, a rope socket and jars, all of which were strung together and suspended from the crown pulley by the cable. In addition there were the wrought-iron casings for the lining of the projected experimental well. Nothing essential had been overlooked, and before long Tom found himself in a position to begin the tests on which he was counting so much.

Ned in the meantime had been having troubles on the accounting end. At the expiration of the two weeks when it was stipulated that the second five thousand dollar payment should be made, the check was not forthcoming. Ned telegraphed to Thompson and hunted up Hankinshaw. Both of them put the blame on Bragden, who at the time, they stated, was on a short vacation from which he would return in a few days,

when the matter would be promptly adjusted. This, however, did not satisfy Ned, who recognized the familiar tricks of "shoestring" concerns, and he proceeded at once to "put on the screws." But it was only when he threatened immediate stoppage of work on the contract that the draft he had sent through was finally honored.

"I told you they were as slippery as eels," Ned reminded Tom, as they looked at the cashier's check whose delay had been so annoying.

"Yes, and perhaps you wouldn't have been so far wrong if you had added that they were as crooked as corkscrews," replied Tom.

"Bless my premonitions! I'm afraid you're right," exclaimed a voice behind them.

CHAPTER IX

THE MIDNIGHT PROWLER

TOM and Ned looked up, a little startled, and saw their eccentric friend, Mr. Wakefield Damon.

"Bless my gum shoes!" exclaimed Mr. Damon, wiping his glasses and settling into the chair that Tom pulled over for him. "I came in on you like a thief in the night, and by a coincidence I hear you talking about thieves."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to put it as strongly as that," said Tom, with a laugh. "But all the same the actions of that oil crowd don't seem to be those of responsible business men. We've been having no end of trouble with them, one way and another."

"I'm afraid perhaps I made a mistake in introducing them to you," said Mr. Damon, with a slightly worried look. "Thompson was the only one of them I knew, and even with him my acquaintance was slight. By the way, did you get that second payment? Ned, here, was telling me that they seemed to be trying to sidestep it."

"It came in to-day," replied Tom. "But we had a heap of trouble in getting it. Here it is," and he handed it over for his friend's inspection.

Mr. Damon scrutinized it carefully and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Well, that puts you on easy street, anyway," he said. "They'll have to come across with the rest now to save what they've already invested. But I'm afraid somebody else is in for a trimming."

"What do you mean by that?" inquired Tom, with quickened interest.

"I heard something when I was on my last trip to New York that set me thinking," replied Mr. Damon. "I dropped into one of the clubs as the guest of a friend of mine who is a member, and among the people to whom I was introduced was a large Texas oil producer. Of course, that interested me at once, apart from the fact that he was a most entertaining talker. He told me a lot about his own experiences there, and in the course of the conversation got going about the many "wild-catters" that infest the oil fields.

"You know the wild-catter is to the legitimate oil man very much what the bucket-shop keeper is to the solid Wall Street broker. He hates him as he does ivy poison. The shady tricks in which the wild-catter indulges cast a stigma on the whole oil-producing business.

"Well, this man, in giving me some illustrations of wild-cat methods, happened to mention the name of Thompson. Said he was one of the most suave and polished individuals that roamed over the oil fields.

"I didn't let on that I knew any one of that name, but from the description he gave me of his personal appearance and manners, I feel sure that it's this fellow you're making this material for. I led him on to tell me what he knew of him, and if what he said is true, this Thompson ought to have his picture in the rogues' gallery. Not that he ever will probably. He's too shrewd for that. Always manages somehow or other to keep just within the law.

"Among other things, this new acquaintance of mine said that he'd heard that Thompson and his partners were trying to put something over on an old blind man who owns a likely property at Goby, I think it was, close to one of the big gushers that has come in recently. The old man didn't want to sell or lease, and the Thompson crowd were determined to make him. Just how they were going to bamboozle him or coerce him, my informant didn't know, but he had heard enough before he left to be sure that some shennanigan was on foot. Said he'd bet a hundred dollars to a plugged nickel that before many moons had passed the gang would have the prop-

erty and the blind man would find himself buncoed."

"So that's the kind of fellows they are!" exclaimed Tom hotly. "If I weren't held by my contract I wouldn't do another jot of work for them."

"Oh, well, it isn't a dead certainty that that Thompson and our Thompson are the same man," said Mr. Damon. "It's a common enough name, as far as that goes."

"Still, I think they're identical," insisted Tom.

"At any rate, you'll be through with the job soon and then you'll be rid of them for good and all. By the way, how's the work coming on?"

"All right," replied Tom. "Unless something unforeseen happens we'll be through on schedule time."

"What's that thing on the grounds that looks like a derrick?" asked Mr. Damon. "It wasn't there when I went away. Seems to have gone up almost over night, like Jonah's gourd."

"Oh, it's a contrivance that I had built to test an idea of mine," answered Tom.

At once Mr. Damon was after the hint like a terrier after a rat.

"Invented something new?" he asked eagerly.

"Not quite yet," replied Tom, with a smile. "But I've hit on an idea that may amount to

something when I've worked it out more thoroughly."

"Good for you!" cried Mr. Damon enthusiastically. "I knew you wouldn't be at this thing long before you struck something that would make anything that had gone before look like thirty cents. More power to you, my boy. What does your father think of it?"

"It hits him hard," replied Tom. "I've gone into the thing pretty thoroughly with him and I've benefited a lot by his suggestions. He thinks it will mean an immense saving in time, expense and man power. So far, we haven't run up against any obstacle that seems insurmountable. Still, you never can tell till it actually gets to working. It may turn out to be a flivver after all."

"Bless my modesty!" snorted Mr. Damon unbelievingly. "Hear Tom Swift talk about flivvering! That's one thing he's never done yet."

"There's got to be a first time for everything," bantered Tom.

"It'll be a long time coming," retorted Mr. Damon. "One thing I'm certain of," he went on; "and that is you'll have a mighty fine market for your invention when you get it perfected. You'll have all the big companies bidding against each other to get hold of it. I tell you, my boy, there'll be a fortune in it."

"Let's hope so," said Tom. "But the pot of gold is still at the foot of the rainbow and it may be a long tramp until I reach it."

Although Tom expressed himself in this cautious way, he felt quite certain in his own heart that he had hit upon a great invention. This concerned itself with the drill with its sharp cutting edge, or bit. Up to that time dependence had been placed upon having a hard tempered edge that cut into and splintered the rock by its sharpness, its weight and the distance from which it fell.

This was much. But Tom's theory was that where there was much there could always be added more. Suppose a circular motion could be given to the bit at the moment of contact and the bit itself so shaped that in addition to the crushing power given by the weight and fall there would be a grinding, scooping movement that would eat into the very heart of the soil or rock, making each stroke vastly more efficient. If he could double its effectiveness, he would wipe out at once half the time required, half the wear and tear on the machinery, half the man power required, and vastly reduce the overhead expense. It would mean an incalculable saving to the oil industry, and to Tom himself it would mean a fortune.

His father agreed with him that he had hit

upon an idea that went to the core of the matter. Then followed long days and nights of experimenting, until at last just as the dawn was lighting up the sky on one memorable morning Tom leaped from his seat in wild exultation and fairly shouted:

"I've got it! I've got it!"

After the first few minutes of jubilation, he went over his figures and diagrams again. Yes, if there was anything in mathematics, he had proved that the new drill and bit would do what was expected of them.

But the invention had first to be demonstrated in actual working, and he pushed forward energetically the work in his experimental plant.

About a week later he was working alone in the office, when, shortly after midnight, there was a knock at the door and Koku, whose night it was for self-imposed duty, entered. His eyes were rolling in agitation, and he had his fingers on his lips as though to impose silence.

"What is it, Koku?" asked Tom, somewhat startled by the air of mystery.

"S-sh," warned Koku. "Man down at fence. Saw light."

Instantly Tom was outside. He looked down toward the stockade that enclosed the experimental plant, but could see nothing.

"Guess you must have been dreaming, Koku," he whispered.

"No," said Koku. "Light come. Light go. There is now."

Tom, too, saw a sudden gleam, as suddenly extinguished, that evidently came from a flashlight.

"Come, Koku," he commanded, and moved down stealthily toward the fence.

CHAPTER X

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

DESPITE his great size, Koku was as light on his feet as a cat, and he made no sound as he followed in Tom's footsteps. As silently as panthers they approached the fence.

Tom had slipped a revolver into his pocket as he left the office, as a matter of precaution, though he hardly thought he would have occasion to use it, and would only do so in the last extremity. Ordinarily his sinewy arms and powerful fists were a sufficient reliance. But there was no telling whether he would have to face an individual or a gang, and it was well to be prepared for any emergency.

One thing was certain. Whoever was there had no right to be there and could only have come for some evil purpose.

They had caught one more glance of a flash of light, but only one. Now everything was in absolute darkness. There was no moon and the ordinary blackness of the night was deepened by

heavy clouds that presaged a storm. Tom could scarcely see his hand before his face, and it was only by reaching out occasionally and touching Koku that he knew the latter was close on his heels.

Tom had a powerful flashlight with him, but it was unnecessary to use it just then, for he was so familiar with every foot of the yard that he could have gone to the fence blindfolded. Besides, it was essential that the prowler or prowlers be kept in ignorance that their unlawful visit had been discovered.

Soon they were near the fence, and Tom caught one of Koku's hands and drew him to him.

"Now, Koku," he whispered, "I'll go around one side of the fence and you go round the other until we meet. If you come across any one, grab him and hold him fast. But don't call out, as that may warn others who may be with him. Hold him till I come up to you. No rough stuff. Don't hurt him. Just hang on to him."

Koku nodded and started round one side while Tom went in the opposite direction. There was not a sound to break the stillness. If there was any one about, he was acting with extreme caution.

Before long they had together completed the circuit and met.

"Did you see any one, Koku?" queried Tom, in a whisper.

"No," was the reply. "But there is ladder against fence. Come." And, turning, the giant, followed by Tom, went back to where a ladder was propped against the wall of the enclosure.

As Tom's eye ran along its length, a flare of light stabbed the air but was quickly extinguished. At first it seemed to him like a faint gleam of lightning, but there was no thunder, and he realized that it had probably come from a flashlight.

Motioning to Koku to remain where he was, Tom went up the ladder. When he reached the top, he slowly and cautiously raised his head above the fence.

At first he could see nothing except the bulky derrick, which stood out as a formless blot against the blackness. But while he listened intently, he heard the clink of metal as though a hand were fumbling among tools, and an instant later there came another flash that revealed the figure of a man bending down with his back toward him.

Like a ghost, Tom slipped down the ladder. Then he laid the ladder flat on the ground, and, telling Koku to follow, went rapidly around to the gate of the enclosure.

He inserted his key in the lock, opened the gate slowly so that no grinding of the hinges

should betray his presence, and then like two shadows the pair moved toward the derrick.

Again the clink of metal guided them, and soon they were within a few feet of the intruder, whose form was dimly visible.

Tom drew his flashlight from his pocket and touched Koku as a signal to be in readiness.

"Now!" cried Tom, and flashed his powerful light full in the face of Hankinshaw.

With a startled exclamation the latter started back, while at the same time his hand reached toward his hip pocket. But in that instant the giant Koku had leaped upon him and pinioned his arms behind his back.

Hankinshaw was a heavily built man and he struggled violently to free himself. But in Koku's hands he was as helpless as an infant.

"Hold him, Koku," commanded Tom, and went to the derrick. He took a lantern off a peg, lighted it and returned. He set the lantern on the ground and pocketed his flashlight. Then he passed his hands lightly over Hankinshaw's clothes and drew from the latter's pocket a revolver, fully loaded. He broke the stock, took out the cartridges and threw the now useless weapon on the ground.

During this process, Hankinshaw fumed and frothed and burst out in imprecations, to all of which Tom paid not the slightest attention.

"Now put him down on the ground, Koku," directed Tom.

The giant obeyed, and Hankinshaw found himself sitting on the ground with startling suddenness. He started to get up, but Koku's hands on his shoulders put him back with a force that jarred him and made his teeth chatter.

"Better stay put," warned Tom. "That man of mine doesn't know how strong he really is, and if he grabs you again you're apt to get hurt. It will be healthier for you to stay right where you are until I tell you to get up. Get me?"

Hankinshaw evidently did "get" him, and sat still, his face black with rage.

"This is an infernal outrage," he shouted. "I'll get even with you, and don't you forget it. What do you mean by assaulting me in this way, you and your man? I'll——"

A long string of threats and expletives followed. Tom let him rave, looking steadily at him the while until beneath the blistering contempt in his eyes Hankinshaw faltered, sputtered and tapered off into a confused and incoherent snarl.

"Are you through now?" asked Tom.

"Not through with you, by a long shot," snarled Hankinshaw.

"Whether you are or not, you're going to listen to me now," said Tom. "Unless," he added, as

though by an afterthought, "you'd rather have the police and the district attorney do the talking?"

At the word "police" Hankinshaw's face blanched and his bluster dropped away.

"Because, you know," went on Tom, "this is a police matter. I find you in the dead of night on my property after scaling a locked enclosure, handling my implements, and for all I know getting ready to carry them away. It's as though I woke up in my room at night and found a burglar rifling my bureau drawers. The fact that he didn't have time to get anything before I nabbed him wouldn't prevent his being tried and convicted for burglary. I imagine that if I chose to hand you over they'd put you where the dogs couldn't bite you for a while."

Hankinshaw moistened his parched lips with his tongue.

"There's no use talking that way," he said, and there was unmistakable fear in his voice. "Why should I want to take anything away? And how could I if I did want to? They're too heavy to handle. Do you think I'd walk off with your derrick?"

"Stop your stalling, Hankinshaw, and tell me the truth—that is, if you can," commanded Tom sharply. "What were you doing in this enclosure at this time of night?"

"Why—why, I was restless and—and couldn't sleep," stammered Hankinshaw. "So I dressed and went out——"

"For a nice little moonlight stroll, I suppose," interrupted Tom sarcastically, looking up at the lowering sky.

CHAPTER XI

A RASCAL FOILED

"I WENT out," continued Hankinshaw, affecting not to notice the unbelief in Tom's voice, "for a walk——"

"Taking your revolver along," suggested Tom.

"That's a habit I got down in Texas. One never knows down in the oil fields when it is going to come in handy. As I was saying, I went out for a walk and found myself coming in this direction. I happened to catch sight of the derrick——"

"Where did you see it from?" asked Tom.

"From the road, of course," answered Hankinshaw.

"You caught sight of the derrick from the road three hundred feet away on a night when you couldn't see anything ten feet ahead of you?" exclaimed Tom. "But go ahead. You interest me strangely."

"I don't mean exactly that I saw it," said Hankinshaw, in confusion. "But I'd seen it in the daytime, and being so near it I suppose the

thought of it came into my mind. Just from curiosity, I thought I'd come over and see what it was like. I didn't think any one would mind. Didn't know there was anything especially secret about it."

"Didn't suspect that even when you found the gate was locked, eh?" queried Tom.

"No," affirmed Hankinshaw brazenly. "I was turning away when I stumbled against a ladder that some workman had left in the grass. That put it into my mind that I could get a squint at the derrick after all, and on the impulse of the moment I put it up and climbed over the fence."

"How lucky it was that you just happened to have a flashlight along," said Tom. "I suppose carrying flashlights is another habit you got down in Texas."

"Yes," returned Hankinshaw. "You have to travel around a good deal at night there, and you never know when you may need one. But now I've told you the whole story. I suppose I was trespassing, and I'm sorry now I did it, seeing the way you look at it. But you're just making a mountain out of a molehill."

"I imagine a burglar might say the same thing," replied Tom, and his tone was so like steel that Hankinshaw visibly winced. "Now listen to me, Hankinshaw. I don't believe a word of what you've been saying. It's a false-

hood from beginning to end. You deliberately committed a crime to-night, and you know as well as I do what chance you'd have if you told a fairy tale like this to a judge or jury. All I'd have to do would be to telephone to police headquarters and you'd be under lock and key in a hurry. But I'm not going to do that."

An expression of immense relief came into the rascal's face.

"Oh, it's not out of any consideration for you," Tom assured him. "It's partly because I don't want any scandal that would worry my father in his present feeble state of health. Then, too, I'm too busy just now to take the time to prosecute you and send you where you belong. But don't think for a moment that this ridiculous story of yours has imposed on me. You came to this plant to-night with one of two purposes in view."

Hankinshaw started to protest, but Tom cut him short.

"Don't add any more lies to those you've already told," he said. "You may have had revenge in mind for what happened the other night down in the town. You may have thought that you'd be able to cripple the machinery here and put me to a lot of expense and trouble. That's one possibility, and knowing you as I do I wouldn't put it past you.

"On the other hand, you may have had it in mind to steal some invention I might be trying out here. You know that invention is my line, and you may have thought that I had discovered some improvement or new device to be used in oil digging that you could get hold of and turn to your profit. That would explain why you were so carefully handling and examining the tools here when we came upon you.

"One of these two things, perhaps both, was in your mind to-night when you stole in here like a thief. I don't know which and I don't care. But just let me tell you one thing, Hankinshaw. If I ever catch you hanging around this place again either by day or night, may heaven have mercy on you, for I won't. There'll be a guard here after this during every one of the twenty-four hours. He'll be armed, and he'll have his orders what to do to any vermin that may be trying to worm its way into this enclosure.

"Now, that'll be about all. Stand up and get out of here and get out quick. Koku, you go down with him till he reaches the road. Don't hurt him, but keep close behind him. Now, Hankinshaw, pick up that revolver of yours and go. And don't forget a single word of what I've said to you, for I mean every syllable."

The baffled miscreant got up, muttering things that he was careful to say under his breath.

Koku, menacing as fate, stood hovering over him. The giant had not understood much of what had been said, but he knew that this man was his master's enemy and nothing would have given him greater pleasure than to wring the rascal's neck. Hankinshaw was fully conscious of this, and he sullenly pocketed the now useless revolver and moved toward the gate, with Koku stalking close behind him. As he passed Tom, he favored him with a glance that was malignity itself. Then he passed out into the darkness.

"Him bad man—so bad man," grunted the giant, as he came back to Tom's side.

"I reckon you are right, Koku," answered the young inventor. "But we caught him red-handed, didn't we?"

"Him like snake in the grass."

"So he is."

"Him do harm to Massa Tom. Must watch out."

"Then you think he is a bad egg, do you?"

"Him worse than many bad eggs!"

"Well, maybe, Koku. We'll see."

Tom extinguished the lantern, hung it in its place, locked the gate carefully and returned to the office. It was now long past midnight, but he was too wrought up to have any desire to sleep. He sat with his elbows on the desk and his head in his hands, immersed in thought.

What had been Hankinshaw's real motive? On reflection, Tom dismissed the idea that he had intended to cripple the machinery. Much more probable it seemed to him that the fellow had heard in some way that he was busy on some new invention, that the machinery had been rigged up for the purpose of testing it, and that he might make a fortune if he could steal the idea and have it patented before Tom himself should have time to do it.

But how could he have heard of it? Tom had been extremely careful to keep the matter in the circle of a few trusted friends. His father, Ned, Jackson and Mr. Damon were the only ones that knew of it. The first three would have been as silent as the grave concerning it. As for Mr. Damon, although he was impulsive and talkative, he was a keen business man and knew too well the importance of secrecy in a matter of this kind to speak of it to anybody, much less to a fellow like Hankinshaw, whom he disliked and distrusted.

There was but one conclusion. Hankinshaw had acted on a probability. He could not have been hanging around Shopton so long without having heard of the marvelous inventive genius of Tom, and he had jumped to the conclusion that this would have been turned in the direction of oil-well machinery while he was working to

fulfill his contract. He had acted on the guess, and it was by the merest chance that he had been thwarted. If Koku had not happened to see that flash of light! Good old Koku!

One thing was certain. Hankinshaw, already an enemy, was now a deadly one. He would never forget or forgive the humiliation he had suffered that night. Tom must be on his guard.

CHAPTER XII

THE NEW DRILL

Tom did not mention the matter of Hankinshaw's behavior to his father the next day, because he did not want to worry him. He had also put Koku under a strict injunction not to speak of the events of the night. But to Ned, when he turned up at the office, he narrated the whole affair.

The latter was boiling over with indignation.

"It was a pity that you didn't give him all that was coming to him," he declared. "There isn't a doubt but what you could have sent him to prison. Still, I suppose you were right in not giving the matter publicity. I tell you, Tom, we're dealing with a shady crowd, and I wish we'd never taken the contract."

"So do I," agreed Tom. "And I'll be heartily glad when the whole matter's off our hands. Of course, this special thing was probably done by Hankinshaw without the knowledge of the others. He was playing a lone hand, and if he'd

got hold of the invention he'd have got all the profit from it."

"Maybe," assented Ned. "But Thompson and Bragden, although more polished, are probably just as crooked at heart. It's my opinion the whole gang are tarred with the same brush. All I want now is to see the last of them. When we've once delivered the last shipment and have got our money for it, I'll feel like celebrating."

"Well, we'll only have to be patient for about two weeks more," Tom consoled him. "Jackson agreed with me yesterday that it will take only that time to finish up the contract. By the way, how about that third check for five thousand? It's due now, isn't it?"

"Was due three days ago," answered Ned. "Late, as usual. I've had to draw on them. Like pulling teeth to get anything out of them. We have to do our work twice over—once in actually doing it and the second time in getting our money for it. But we've got them on the hip now. They've paid so much that it will be more profitable for them now to pay the rest than to cheat us out of it."

"There's some silver lining to the cloud, anyway," observed Tom more cheerfully. "If it hadn't been for this contract I wouldn't have been thinking about oil and wouldn't have perfected this new idea of mine. We'll forget all

about this bother when the money comes rolling in from the patent rights. That is, if it does," he added, with a return to his habitual caution.

"No modifications, you old gloom hound," laughed Ned. "You gave yourself away that time. Own up, old boy, you know that you've got a good thing. Come now, don't you?"

Tom grinned.

"On the level, Ned, I feel pretty sure of it," he confessed. "Of course, 'there's many a slip between the cup and the lip,' and I may be letting myself in for a disappointment. The next few days will tell. By day after to-morrow I'll be all ready to put the new drill to a practical test. It won't take long to know whether it's going to work or not."

The next two days were busy ones for Tom. He was, too, at high nervous tension, wondering whether his idea would "go over big" or fail. He had checked and re-checked on his figures, and could find no flaw in them. And figures did not lie. Still——

He saw nothing of Hankinshaw. Either the man had left town temporarily or he was keeping carefully under cover. Tom did not care which, as long as the rascal kept out of his way.

At last the momentous morning came when Tom was to try out his new drill. A few trusted workmen had been chosen to work the machin-

ery. That was all they were concerned with, and they would be in no position to gauge the meaning of whatever results would be obtained. Jackson was there to help, and Ned and his father were also on hand.

The miniature well was started, and for a time nothing was heard but the creaking of the derrick and the chugging of the drill as it worked its way through the soil. Tom, of course, knew the ordinary rate of progress made in well digging with the usual type of drill. But by how much would he be able to beat it? Or would he beat it at all?

The morning passed with interest at fever heat. It seemed to Tom that he was making rapid progress. But the results of any one hour would not give him a sufficient basis to generalize from. Special circumstances might make the results small or great. The work would have to be spread over several hours before he could reach an average from which he could draw safe and sound conclusions.

At noon the men stopped for lunch, but Tom was too much excited to eat. He spent that time in studying the character of the soil through which the drill had been biting its way and the depth that it had reached.

The results astounded him. He thought he must have made a mistake in his calculations and

went over them again. But no. The figures were correct. Was he dreaming?

His father, who had been looking over his shoulder, was equally startled.

"Why, Tom!" he exclaimed, "do you realize what that means? That's three times as much as you could have got with the ordinary drill."

"I know," said Tom, in a voice that he tried to keep calm. "I thought I must have miscalculated. Do you see any error in the figures?"

"None at all," was the answer. "They're perfectly correct. But it seems almost beyond belief."

"Well," said Tom, "one swallow doesn't make a summer, and one test doesn't prove that others will be just like it. Perhaps the soil was lighter and easier to penetrate than it really seems. The real test will come when we strike rock."

They struck rock that afternoon, and the way the drill ground and scrunched its way through it was music to Tom's ears. It ate its way with surprising rapidity, which was the more remarkable because the specimens brought up showed it to be of a remarkably hard quality. Here again the same comparative gain was made over the ordinary rate of rock penetration.

Still Tom refused to be rushed off his feet, and the work went on for two days more, days

of steadily decreasing doubt, days of steadily increasing jubilation.

At the end of the third day, Tom knew that beyond the peradventure of a doubt he had "struck it." He would have been delighted if his new drill had proved to be able to do half as much again as the one commonly in use. He would have been astounded had it proved to be able to do twice as much.

But the result had far outrun his wildest expectations. The principle that he had embodied in his new drill had *trebled* its effectiveness. He had hit on something that was destined to revolutionize the oil industry.

Once more that inventive brain of Tom Swift's would startle the world!

CHAPTER XIII

A NIGHT OF TRIUMPH

ALL his close friends were with Tom in the office on the memorable night when his hopes became certainty. His father, Ned and Mr. Damon had hung breathlessly on his final calculations, and when he at last looked up with the triumphant smile that could mean only one thing, they were almost as jubilant as he and overwhelmed him with congratulations.

"Bless my oil stocks!" cried Mr. Damon, slapping him on the shoulder. "Tom, my boy, you're a wonder."

"You've got all other inventors tied to the mast and screeching for help," affirmed Ned, as he wrung his friend's hand.

"I knew you would do it," said his father quietly, as he wiped his glasses. And to Tom this calm, affectionate assurance was the sweetest praise of all.

"Are you sure that the patent has been attended to all right?" asked Mr. Damon anxiously.

"You can bet," answered Tom. "We had a wire from Reid and Crawford, our Washington lawyers, to-day, and they tell us that everything is O. K. It doesn't infringe on any previous patent, and the idea of the drill is entirely new. The lawyers themselves think it's great."

"The next thing, I suppose," went on Mr. Damon, "will be to get in touch with some of the big companies, tell them what your drill can do, give them a demonstration and then lean back and let them bid against each other."

"N-no," replied Tom thoughtfully, "I don't think that will be the next thing. I'm not quite ready for that."

The whole company looked at him in surprise.

"Just what do you mean by that?" asked Ned, in a puzzled way.

"Why," said Tom, "I've been thinking that I might go down to the oil fields and take a whirl myself at oil-well digging. What's the matter," he added with a grin, "with becoming a magnate on my own account?"

There was a chorus of exclamations. None had had the slightest intimation that Tom had been thinking of anything of the kind.

"What's put that idea into your head?" asked his father.

"I've been reading and thinking so much about oil lately that it's sort of got a grip on me," re-

plied Tom. "I'm eager to see the thing at first hand. Then, too, I want to put the drill to work on a real honest-to-goodness well. I'll be much better qualified after that to talk business to any one who may want to buy the invention. Then, too, I may find that we can make more money by keeping the invention for ourselves than we can by selling it to somebody. Of course, it's only an idea as yet, and I haven't thought it through. My present impression, however, is that I'll go down there."

"When do you think of going?" asked Ned.

"Just as soon as we get this oil-well machinery contract off our hands," was the answer. "Say, about a month from now. How would you like to go with me, Ned?"

"I'd like it above all things," answered Ned. "I guess we could get things in shape so that the business would go on all right for the few weeks we'd be gone. And your father would be here to supervise things generally."

"Bless my railroad ticket! I'll go along too," exclaimed their eccentric friend. "I always like to keep an eye on what Tom is doing. I've had a hankering, too, for a long time to see what an oil field is like. Count me in on this. That is, of course, if you want me."

"You bet we want you," said Tom cordially. "It wouldn't seem natural if you weren't some-

where within hail. My airplane will easily carry the three of us."

"Bless my life insurance! No, no," cried Mr. Damon. "You young fellows can go that way, but I'm a little too much under the weather just now for that. The railroad will be plenty good enough for me this time. But I'll make the trip so that I'll get there about the same time you do."

"Why, Mr. Damon, are you really going to give up sky flying?" questioned Tom, in surprise.

"Only this time, Tom. Bless my wings! I can't be with you always. Besides, I've got to stop off at Washington and maybe one or two other cities on business. But, as I said before, I'll fix it so I'll get down there about the same time you do."

There was some further discussion of the matter, and when they separated, the trip had been practically decided upon, only the exact date remaining to be fixed later on.

The next night Tom ran up to make a call on Mary. He had been so engrossed of late with his invention that he had been able to see her but seldom, although there had not been a day when they had not talked together over the telephone. But feeling toward each other as Tom and Mary did, the telephone, they found, was a very inadequate substitute for a face-to-face talk.

To Mary, Tom had confided the fact that he

was working on a new invention, but he had not laid much stress upon it, as he did not want to raise her expectations so high that she would feel keenly disappointed if it should amount to nothing.

Now, however, he had succeeded and was in high feather. He pictured to himself the delight on her face when he should tell her of the new invention and what he hoped from it. Her praise would be his greatest reward. His happiness in success would be doubled by her sharing in it.

He stopped on his way to buy some candy and flowers, and, thus furnished, hurried along to Mary's house and rang the bell.

Instead of a happy face it was a frightened one that Tom saw when Mary opened the door. But it lighted with infinite relief when she saw who it was.

"Oh, Tom, I'm so glad, so glad that you've come!" she exclaimed. "I never needed you so much."

"What's the matter?" asked Tom, in quick alarm. "Any one sick?"

"No," said Mary. "It's that horrid man—that Hankinshaw. He forced himself into the house on the pretext that he wanted to talk business with father. He's been drinking. He——"

But Tom had already dropped his packages. He went into the living room with a rush. Mrs.

Nestor, pale-faced and agitated, was standing in a corner wringing her hands. Mr. Nestor, still far from robust after his recent illness, was expostulating with Hankinshaw and trying to push him outside of the room.

Tom took it all in with a glance. The next instant he had grabbed Hankinshaw by the collar and whirled him around.

CHAPTER XIV

KICKED FOR A GOAL

A LOOK of fear came into the red mottled face of Hankinshaw when he saw who had hold of him.

"Leggo o' me," he said, in a thick voice. "Whazzer matter with you, anyhow? Regular Buttinski!"

Without saying a word, Tom, with one push of his sinewy arm, shoved the fellow out of the room. Without relinquishing his grasp on his collar he forced him through the hall. Mary shrank aside as she watched them coming.

"Hold the door open, Mary, please," said Tom.

She did so and the two antagonists passed out.

"Now close it again, please," called Tom, who did not want her to see what was going to happen.

The instant the door clicked Tom released his hold on Hankinshaw's collar, measured the distance and gave him a tremendous kick that sent him forward as though he had been struck by a catapult. The man tried to keep his balance, but

was unable to do so and went down to the sidewalk on his hands and knees. He scrambled snarling to his feet, to find himself facing Tom, whose face was blazing with wrath.

"Now take yourself off, you loafer," commanded Tom. "That kick was only a sample of what I'll do to you if you don't. Get along now, or I'll muss you up so that your best friends won't know you."

There was such deadly determination in the youth's voice and the force of that kick had been so mighty that Hankinshaw, who had clenched his fists, thought better of it and, contenting himself with a string of coarse expressions, slouched on along the street. Tom watched him until he had disappeared and then returned to the door, which opened at his approach.

"I hope you didn't get into a fight, Tom," Mary said anxiously.

Tom's eyes twinkled.

"Nothing like that," he laughed. "Do I look it? Is my hair mussed? No, I simply had a little football practice. Hankinshaw was the football. I kicked him for a goal. I guess you won't see any more of him. He's due to get out of this town anyway in a few days more."

Mary sighed happily.

"You're our good angel, Tom," she said. "You saved my father's life once, and you al-

ways turn up when I need you most. I don't know what we'd do without you."

"You won't have to do without me," replied Tom. "In fact, you couldn't lose me if you tried," and he grinned broadly.

Mary's parents thanked Tom heartily for his opportune appearance and the way he had rid them of their obnoxious visitor, and then, because they were wise parents, they slipped away on different pretexts and left the young people to themselves.

Tom's new invention and his projected trip to Texas were eagerly discussed by the pair. As regards the first, Mary was enthusiastic.

"It's simply wonderful," she said, after Tom had detailed to her as far as he could the plan of his drill, what it had already done and what he expected it to do. "I don't see where on earth you get all those ideas of yours from. Think of all the men who have been studying along those lines for years without hitting on the thing that you've developed in a few weeks."

"Oh, some one has to think of it first," replied Tom. "Then, too, remember that I had the benefit of what others have already done. It's like a band of pioneers going through a forest and taking turns cutting down the trees to make a trail. Some one of them gets the axe that cuts down the last tree. But he wouldn't be there

to cut it down if he hadn't walked up to it along the paths that the other fellows have made first."

"That's just your modest way of putting it," said Mary. "In this case the last tree was the toughest, and you cut it down in half the time any one else would. So there."

"I'd like to have you on the jury if I were being tried for my life," laughed Tom.

But concerning the trip to Texas, Mary was not by any means so enthusiastic. In fact, her pretty lips had a decided pout.

"It's an awfully long way off," she said, "and when you get down there with your old oil well you'll forget all about poor little me."

"Don't worry, Mary," he answered. "I'll write every day."

The next few days flew by as though on wings, for every waking hour was crowded. There were many details to be attended to in connection with the approaching trip. Tom had decided to take along with him the flying boat that he had used in his trip to Iceland. It was a bigger one than he ordinarily would have needed, but he wanted to carry along a good deal of material in addition to that which he would send by rail, so that he would lose no time in getting to work on the oil well he proposed to dig. The plane needed a good deal of overhauling to get it into perfect condition, and Tom often found

himself wishing that he had a dozen hands instead of only two.

Ned, too, had troubles to adjust and was kept as busy, to use his expression, as a "one-armed paperhanger with the hives." The contract with the Hankinshaw crowd had been completed and the material was ready for shipment. But the final check in payment was slow in coming. When at last it did come, Ned advised that they should not at once ship the machinery. He telegraphed the bank and found that there was not sufficient money on hand to meet the check when presented. The idea of the sharpers had been, of course, that in the ordinary course the check would not be presented for several days at the California bank. Then, if refused, several days more would elapse before the protested check would get back to Shopton. By that time they figured that the material would be far on its way to Texas and the Swift Construction Company could whistle for its money.

"But anybody that gets the best of Ned Newton in financial matters will have to get up pretty early in the morning, and the Hankinshaw crowd did not get up early enough," laughed Tom.

Ned's precautionary telegram thwarted the scheme, and the foiled conspirators, after lame explanations, were forced to pay in actual cash—no check this time—for the final payment. Then

the stop order was lifted and the material was put on board the train for its long journey to the oil fields.

"And that's that," remarked Ned, with a sigh of relief after the last detail had been attended to. "Thank goodness, that's off our hands. The Swift Construction Company never had so much bother with a contract in its life. When those fellows want some more machinery, I'd say, let them apply to some one else. We're fed up with them."

"Right you are," agreed Tom. "Just what part of Texas did you ship it to?"

"Copperhead," answered Ned. "That's right in the heart of a newly developed oil region."

"Copperhead," repeated Tom. "Sounds like a snake."

"There'll be some snakes there when the Hankinshaw crowd get on the job," affirmed Ned.

"I think we'll make that our destination," said Tom thoughtfully.

"Why?" asked Ned.

"Well," said Tom, "we've got to pick out some place to begin, and that's probably as good as any other. Then, too, I have some curiosity to see what Hankinshaw and his brother snakes are doing."

"Whom they're doing, you mean," suggested Ned.

"I suppose that would be more correct," said Tom with a smile. "What I'm thinking of especially is that old blind man that Mr. Damon told us about. You remember, don't you, that he said that the Hankinshaw crowd were out to swindle him out of his property? Perhaps we can put a spoke in their wheel."

Ned groaned.

"Great Scott, Tom!" he exclaimed. "Can't you stick to business and stop looking for trouble?"

CHAPTER XV

OFF FOR THE OIL FIELDS

Tom grinned at the earnestness in Ned's tone.

"Don't be worried, old boy," he said. "We'll give all the attention to business that it needs. But if on the side we can at the same time help an old fellow along, why shouldn't we? But that's a matter that we can settle when we come to it. All we have to do now is to get ready for the trip."

Before he left for Texas, Tom went up again to the hospital to get news of the young aviator.

"Oh, he's getting along," replied Dr. Sherwood to Tom's question. "That is, physically. His leg has mended, though he still has to use a cane. But his head isn't clear yet. He can't talk intelligently. As a matter of fact, perhaps he never will."

"You don't mean that he may be insane for the rest of his life!" exclaimed Tom, genuinely shocked.

"That's among the possibilities," affirmed the

doctor. "Though considering his youth and vitality—he's a strong young fellow—the chances are that he'll recover. Still, no one can tell. You can go out and take a look at him yourself if you like. He's sunning himself on a bench in the garden."

Tom went out and seated himself on the bench beside the invalid. He had a good look at him for the first time under anything like normal conditions. The young aviator had evidently been sinewy and stalwart when in health, judging from his frame, though now thin from his long illness. His face must have been a pleasant one, though marred now by the vacant look in his eyes.

Tom tried to get in conversation with him.

"How are you, Hillobie?" he asked, using the name at a venture.

The boy looked at him without any sign of interest and made no reply. Tom tried again several times but fruitlessly, and at last had to give it up. He left the hospital in a depressed mood, wondering if, after all, he had done the young man a real service in saving his life. Of what use was life without reason?

The Swift Construction Company hurried things along, and in about a week Tom was ready for the start. The young inventor had decided to take Koku with him, as his great strength and

loyal devotion might prove invaluable. The giant was in great glee and grinned from ear to ear when apprised of Tom's decision, but Rad was thoroughly disgusted.

"To hev dat big chunk o' beef clutterin' up the plane!" he snorted. "Doan know whut you must be t'inkin' uv, Marse Tom."

"But don't you see, Rad," said Tom soothingly, trying to keep a serious face, "that I wouldn't dare go off and leave this place alone without you to take care of things? How could I have an easy minute unless I could keep saying to myself: 'Everything's all right at home. Rad's on the job?'"

The old negro bridled up proudly.

"Guess yo's right, Marse Tom," he chuckled, all his resentment vanishing. "Didn't see it dat way befo'. Takes brains to run dis yere house. An' when it cums to brains, dat big grampus Koku ain't dere. Nussah, he jes' ain't dere."

So peace was reëstablished between Tom's faithful retainers, each of whom thought the other had special reason to envy him.

At last all was ready. Tom had had a long and tender interview with Mary, the final directions had been given for the running of the works during the absence of Tom and Ned, and one bright morning, with many of Tom's friends and all the workmen assembled to bid the voyagers

Godspeed, the *Winged Arrow* rose like a huge bird from the grounds of the plant, soared high in air to the altitude of two thousand feet, and turned her nose toward the oil fields of Texas.

Tom had figured that, barring accidents and with ordinary good luck, he would be able to reach his destination on the following day. This was asking a good deal of the *Winged Arrow,* but the result justified Tom's confidence. The engines ran like a dream, the weather was superb, neither fog nor storm intervened, and on the afternoon of the following day those in the airship sighted the town of which they were in search.

It lay beneath them sprawling in the heat of the Texas sun, one of the hastily built pioneer towns that spring up like magic in the wake of an oil strike. It was a mere collection of wooden shacks that looked as though little more than a breath would be required to blow them down. But they sufficed for the immediate needs of the hardy adventurers who were seeking a quick road to fortune. Many had found it, many more hoped to find it. The man "stony broke" in the morning might be a millionaire before night.

Tom circled about, looking for a likely landing place. This was not a matter of much difficulty, for there was a host of open spaces on the outskirts of the town. He soon found one suited

to his purpose, and the *Winged Arrow* came down as softly as a swan.

Scarcely had she stopped before the passengers were out on the ground, stretching their cramped legs on Texas soil. It was a delightful change after their long confinement in the plane. The warmth, too, was congenial, contrasting as it did so strongly with the chill of the upper air. They were in high spirits over the successful termination of the flight. Tom and Ned laughed aloud, and Koku was one broad grin.

"So far, so good," remarked Tom, patting the *Winged Arrow* proudly. "You certainly are the goods, old girl. Now for the town and a hot meal. You'll have to stay here and mind the plane, Koku, but we'll see that you get yours later."

In a few minutes they were in the town. It was their first experience in such surroundings, and they looked about them curiously.

There was no pretence at order or regularity in the shacks that served as dwellings and business houses. It seemed as though they had been built wherever the traveler had dropped his pack. There was one main street, a long, straggling, crooked thoroughfare, from which a number of smaller streets branched off here and there at irregular intervals. The houses were of the rudest description. Two or three men and one day

would have sufficed to build most of them. Many of them were of the one-story type with one or two rooms and earth floors. Others, more pretentious, had two stories, the lower part occupied for business purposes and the upper floor as a residence. Let the mere tail-end of a Texas norther come along and they would all have been leveled to the ground like a pack of cards.

Most of the "business" houses were saloons and dance halls. The prohibition law was largely a dead letter as far as Copperhead was concerned. From almost every door the young men passed came the rattle of dice and the clink of bottle against glass, the wheeze of an old accordion or raucous jazz music from a phonograph.

Through the main street passed an almost endless column of wide-wheeled trucks with tugging horses straining in the harness, the trucks themselves loaded with iron casings, and, some of them, with red flags at the back, carrying enough nitro-glycerine to blow the town sky-high in the event of a collision. Weaving in and out of these were dusty automobiles, mule carts driven by negroes, "buggies," every kind of conveyance, some of them looking as though they dated back to Revolutionary times. Other vehicles were parked in rows about saloons, on the front porches of which loungers sat in tipped-back chairs.

And derricks! There were derricks everywhere, some of them in the town itself, in back yards where the precious fluid had been discovered. Some of the buildings were plastered with oil that had spattered against them in a black flood when a strike had been made. And all about the town for as far as the eye could reach rose a multitude of derricks in a perfect forest, towering, some of them, to the height of eighty or a hundred feet.

Through the roughly dressed multitudes that thronged the principal street, Tom and Ned threaded their way. Airplanes had become common in that locality, and no one paid any especial attention to the aviator suits in which the youths were clad. There was little choice as to restaurants. None of them was good, and it was only a question of which was the least bad. Even this could not be determined at a glance, and the lads finally entered one that seemed to be at least no worse than the others.

Nor was there much choice as to food. The rough-looking waiter in a dirty apron told them they could have corned beef and cabbage or ham and eggs. They ordered the latter, which soon made their appearance, accompanied by cups of weak, muddy coffee. Then, while they ate, they looked curiously about them.

The restaurant, like all others in the town, was

only an adjunct to a saloon, and the sale of drinks was much more profitable than that of food. Before the bar a long line of the thirsty stood.

Suddenly Ned nudged Tom.

"Look who's here," he whispered.

CHAPTER XVI

ON THE TRAIL OF FORTUNE

Tom looked in the direction indicated, and among the men standing at the bar saw Hankinshaw. The mottled face was even redder than usual.

"Can't seem to avoid that fellow," remarked Tom disgustedly. "He's a regular jinx."

Either Hankinshaw had not seen them or he had not recognized them in their aviators' suits, for he paid no attention to them. He took one drink more and then lurched unsteadily out of the place.

Tom and Ned finished their meal and went to the shack that served as post-office and telegraph station. Tom sent off messages to his father and Mary, announcing their safe arrival, and then made some inquiries of the telegraph operator, a bright young college boy who was "fingering the key" to earn some extra money during his vacation.

"Is the town of Goby near here?" asked Tom.

"No town of that name in this section," was

the answer. "But there's a Goby farm owned by a man of that name about four miles from here."

"I guess that's the place I have in mind," said Tom, "though from what a friend of mine told me I thought it was the name of a town. Is the owner of it a blind man?"

"Yes," was the answer. "A nice old fellow he is, too, and he has a daughter that's a perfect peach."

"Tell me about him, will you?"

"I understand that he's a Northerner who came down to this part of the country to regain his health. Since he came here he's gone blind. I imagine he's had rather hard sledding to get along on his half section of land. That is, before the oil craze began. As far as I can learn, his property is right in the midst of the oil region, and he'll probably be able to sell it at a good price. That is, if he doesn't get cheated out of it. Some of these oil prospectors are a pretty slick lot. They'd steal the penny off a dead man's eyes, and they'd rob a blind man as quickly as they'd take a drink."

"I suppose so," remarked Tom. "You say that this farm is about four miles from here. Could you give us more exact directions?"

The obliging operator could and did, and Tom and Ned hurried back to their plane, taking with

them two quarts of coffee and a double portion of ham and eggs and rolls that they had had put up for the faithful Koku.

While the giant feasted, Tom took his bearings, and as soon as Koku had finished they climbed into the *Winged Arrow* and turned it in the direction of the Goby farm. To make a mile a minute was nothing to the powerful plane, and in less than five minutes it was hovering over a homestead which answered to the description that the operator had given. It was in slightly rolling country with several hills in the vicinity, differing from the unrelieved flat plain on which Copperhead stood. It was a pleasant place and seemed like an oasis amid the throng of derricks that reared themselves on every side.

The house itself was a substantial two-story structure with a sloping roof. There were white curtains at the windows and a perfect riot of flowers at the front and around two sides of the building. The whiteness and the daintiness of the curtains seemed to show the presence of a feminine hand.

Tom made a landing about three hundred feet from the house. A movement among the curtains showed that the roar of the engine had attracted attention from at least one of the inmates. Leaving Koku with the plane, Tom and Ned made their way to the house.

Tom knocked and the door was promptly opened by one of the most charming girls imaginable. She was slightly above medium height, had a perfect figure, beautifully formed features, and wavy chestnut hair and limpid brown eyes. It was evident that the enthusiastic young telegraph operator had not erred when he had described her.

To Tom, with his mind and heart full of Mary, she was simply a very pretty girl. To Ned, she seemed a heavenly vision, the sweetest thing he had ever seen.

"Does Mr. Goby live here?" asked Tom, removing his cap.

"Yes," was the reply, in a soft, musical voice that completed Ned's undoing. "I am his daughter. Won't you walk in?"

"My name is Swift," said Tom, as they accepted her invitation, "and this is my friend, Mr. Newton. We came to see your father on a little business matter."

"If you will sit down," she said, as she ushered them into the living room and indicated chairs, "I will call him."

She vanished, followed by Ned's eyes. Tom, looking at his friend, saw him staring at the door through which she had disappeared.

"Hard hit, old boy?" he bantered. "Come out of your trance."

Ned glared at him, but before he could frame a suitable retort the young girl came back, accompanied by a man whom she introduced as her father. Then she excused herself, flushing a trifle as she caught the all too evident admiration in Ned's eyes.

Mr. Goby was a medium-built man somewhat over fifty, with a kindly and intelligent face. He wore a pair of colored spectacles, evidently to cover his loss of sight. The young men took to him at once.

After a few preliminary remarks, Tom launched into the object of their visit. He told him that he and a few of his friends had decided to go into an oil venture, and were looking about for a likely spot to commence operations. They had selected the Copperhead district and had noted that his farm was right in the center of the producing field. Did Mr. Goby care to sell or lease all or part of his property? If he did, Tom thought they might make a deal, as he and his associates were prepared to offer perfectly fair terms.

The blind man listened attentively, though, for a time, the boys could not tell whether interestedly or not.

"Well," said he, "it seems highly probable that oil abounds on this farm of mine. All my friends have told me so, and the fact that rich

strikes have been made all around it seems to confirm the probability. Then, too, I've had a number of offers from speculators and prospectors. One group in particular have been especially pressing. A man named Thompson with two of his friends have seemed very anxious to make some arrangement. But—" here Mr. Goby hesitated for a moment—"perhaps it isn't fair to say so, but there's something about them that doesn't seem to ring quite true. What they offer sounds fair enough, but, somehow, I don't quite feel as though I could trust them. My daughter, Carol, who is pretty shrewd, feels the same way about it."

"I see," murmured Tom, nodding.

"You see," continued Mr. Goby, after some further talk concerning the offer Tom was prepared to make, "I'm at a disadvantage on account of my blindness. So I have to leave most of my business affairs in the hands of an old friend of mine, Judge Wilson, of the district court. I've referred this Mr. Thompson and his partners to the judge, but for some reason or other they seem reluctant to deal with him. They say that I'm the owner of the property, and they'd rather deal direct with me than through my attorney. But how can I sign papers that I haven't read? To be sure, my daughter could read them to me, but even then

I'm not versed in legal matters, and there might be some clause in the contract that would seem perfectly innocent and yet be used to rob me. This farm is all I have in the world, and I have to look out for the future of my daughter."

CHAPTER XVII

CLOSING THE DEAL

"You are perfectly right, Mr. Goby," declared Tom. "Men who refuse to submit a contract to a lawyer are to be distrusted on general principles. No honest man would object. As far as myself and my associates are concerned, we are ready, with your approval, to submit our proposition to Judge Wilson and have him draw up the papers."

"That sounds fair," replied the blind man. "If you like, I'll have my daughter telephone to the judge and ask him to come over to-morrow. By the way, where are you stopping in town?" Mr. Goby had taken a liking to the boys, both so frank and friendly.

"Why, the fact is," answered Tom, "we haven't made any arrangements yet. We just reached here to-day and came right over. We'll have to fix that up when we go back."

"You don't need to do anything in a rush," said Mr. Goby heartily. "We have plenty of

room here, and maybe we could let you stay with us, especially if we come to a deal to work the farm for oil. You might stay to-night, if you care to." And so, a little later, with Carol's consent, it was arranged.

"Seem to be mighty nice people, Ned," remarked Tom, after the young inventor and his chum had been shown to a room where they might wash and make themselves otherwise presentable.

"You are right, Tom; and I hope we come to a satisfactory arrangement with them."

"So do I."

"It would be great to strike something big down here, wouldn't it?"

"Well, we mustn't let our imagination run away with us. We'll have to take what comes."

They had an excellent supper, prepared by Carol with the assistance of an old colored mammy, and a very delightful evening, spent chiefly by Tom in conversation with Mr. Goby, whom he found to be well informed and an entertaining talker.

Ned had developed a sudden interest in flowers, and was very anxious to have Carol show him her garden. She was not unwilling, for this handsome young man who seemed to have dropped down on them from the skies was not an unwelcome visitor.

"Carol's a beautiful name," murmured Ned later that night, as he and Tom were getting ready for bed in the comfortable room to which they had been shown.

Tom stopped in his work of unlacing a shoe and stared at him.

"Sounds like the singing of birds," mused Ned dreamily.

"For the love of Pete!" cried Tom, "what's the matter with you?"

"Oh," said Ned in some confusion, "did I say anything? Guess I must have been thinking out loud."

The next day Judge Wilson came over to the farm. He was a keen, cultivated man of high standing in the legal profession.

"Swift," he repeated, when he was introduced to Tom. "That's a famous name. Any relation to the inventor, Tom Swift?"

Tom flushed with embarrassment.

"A slight relation," put in Ned, with a laugh. "In fact, he's the man himself."

"But you're only a boy, lad!" exclaimed the judge, in wonderment.

"Old enough to have a number of good inventions to his credit," affirmed Ned.

"I'm amazed!" cried the judge, when finally convinced that the boy before him was the noted inventor, Tom Swift. "Well, well, this is in-

deed an honor! I've heard a lot about your wonderful inventions—who hasn't?—but I never expected to have the pleasure of shaking you by the hand."

As a matter of fact, the recognition stood Tom in good stead. It simplified matters immensely. His standing was established at once, and the tedious delay otherwise necessary in looking up his references was obviated.

They were deep in the discussion of terms, when Ned, who happened to be facing the window, saw an automobile coming up the road. It stopped at the gate and three men got out.

Ned gave a low whistle of surprise as he recognized them, and Tom and the judge looked up inquiringly.

"Hankinshaw and his partners," explained Ned.

"Friends of yours?" asked the judge.

"No," replied Ned. "We've known them chiefly in a business way. We——"

Further explanations were prevented by a knock on the door. Carol opened it and ushered the three men into the room.

Blank surprise showed in the faces of all of them when they caught sight of Tom and Ned, who had risen on their entrance. The blank looks were quickly succeeded by looks of intense vexation. Thompson and Bragden, as the more

diplomatic of the trio, banished these promptly, but Hankinshaw's brows remained drawn together in a forbidding scowl.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," said Thompson suavely, as the visitors seated themselves. "Who would have thought that you were down in this part of the country? On a little pleasure trip, I suppose?"

"More business than pleasure," answered Tom coolly.

"Looking for contracts to make some more oil-well machinery?" asked Bragden.

"No," returned Tom. "Though if any came our way we might consider them. We're going to do a little digging on our own account."

"In this neighborhood?" asked Thompson, looking with alarm at the papers that lay on the table near Judge Wilson's elbow.

"Yes," replied Tom, who was getting a little impatient at this cross-examination. "Right on this farm, if Mr. Goby and I can come to terms."

"Cutting in under us, eh?" snarled Hankinshaw. "Poaching on our preserves."

"That remark is quite uncalled for," remarked Judge Wilson, entering the conversation for the first time since the introduction. "Why do you use the phrase 'our preserves'? These gentlemen have no option or claim of any kind on the

property, have they, Mr. Goby?" he continued, turning to the blind man.

"Not at all," replied the owner of the farm. "They have discussed the matter with me several times, but no agreement has been reached."

"No written agreement perhaps," broke in Thompson. "But I certainly thought that we had reached a verbal agreement, or at least a practical understanding the last time we were over here."

"That's what I thought," said Bragden, backing up his partner.

"Sure we did," growled Hankinshaw.

"Nothing of the kind," returned Mr. Goby indignantly. "That is wholly your own assumption. I distinctly told you then, as I had told you before, that you would have to take the matter up with Judge Wilson and that I would do nothing without his approval."

The judge looked at the three men keenly.

"I have always been within easy reach," he remarked. "May I ask why you have not brought the matter to my attention?"

"Our plan has always been to save expense and delay by dealing directly with the owners of property," replied Thompson.

"Even when that owner happens to be a blind man?" asked the judge, with a tinge of sarcasm in his tone.

"His daughter could read the papers to him," replied Thompson defensively.

"A blind man and an inexperienced young girl," mused Judge Wilson, and before the contempt expressed, Thompson and Bragden winced, while Hankinshaw glared.

"Do you give me authority to deal with these gentlemen, Mr. Goby?" asked the judge.

"Absolutely," returned the blind man. "Whatever you say or do will be wholly satisfactory to me."

"That being the case, gentlemen," said the judge, turning to the three partners, "I think we will not detain you any longer. You are doubtless busy men and have many things to attend to."

It was a clear case of dismissal. Thompson turned white with anger, as he and Bragden rose from their chairs.

"You may regret this," said Thompson threateningly, moving toward the door.

"Possibly," replied Judge Wilson indifferently, turning toward his papers.

"You bet you will," bullied Hankinshaw, who remained obstinately planted in his chair.

Tom sprang to his feet.

"Miss Goby," he said, "would you mind stepping from the room for a moment?"

The young girl vanished through a door at the back.

Tom went to the front door and threw it open.

"Just to save Mr. Hankinshaw the trouble," he remarked.

"I'll go when I get ready," snarled Hankinshaw, who was fighting mad at the collapse of his scheme. "I'll——"

He stopped short as the gigantic form of Koku blocked the door.

"Come in, Koku," said Tom. "By the way, Hankinshaw, you remember Koku, don't you? You met him the night that you couldn't sleep. He's a genial sort of fellow, and——"

But Hankinshaw at the sight of Koku had risen from his chair with alacrity and followed his partners from the room.

When they had gone, Tom and Ned and the judge got down to business, and it was not long before they had settled on terms.

Tom had agreed previously with Ned and Mr. Damon that they would go into the oil venture as partners with equal investments and equal profits or losses. And the terms that were made with Mr. Goby were not only fair, but generous. He was to receive a large lump sum at once for the privilege accorded Tom and his partners of drilling on his farm. If the venture failed, he

would still have the farm and a large sum of money. If oil were struck, he was to have a good share of the profits. So that either way he would win.

With the contract signed, Tom and Ned set to work. Through the aid of Judge Wilson, they were able to secure the services of experienced and reliable drillers. Much of their material had already arrived, and other necessaries were secured from the owners of abandoned wells in the vicinity.

In a surprisingly short time, a derrick was rigged, the machinery installed, and all was ready for the venture.

"Now," said Tom, on the morning they started work, as he patted lovingly his new patent drill, "don't fall down on me. Show me what you can do."

While he was busy with these preparations, Tom had not come across any of the Hankinshaw crowd, but from various sources he heard that they were furious at their failure to get hold of the Goby farm and that they were making dire threats of getting even. But he was too busy to pay any attention to these. He felt perfectly confident of his ability to take care of himself no matter what they might do. Not so Mr. Damon.

"They'll be after us, Tom," said the eccentric

man, one day, and his manner showed his nervousness.

"You bet they'll be after us," put in Ned. "Especially if we strike oil."

"We'll keep our eyes trimmed for them," answered the young inventor. "For Hankinshaw especially," he added soberly. He had seen a look in that rascal's eyes that proved the unscrupulous fellow was becoming desperate.

CHAPTER XVIII

A TEST OF COURAGE

At first the well went down rapidly. The earth was soft and sandy near the surface, and with even an ordinary drilling outfit progress would have been fairly rapid. But Tom's newly perfected drill fairly ate its way through the soil, "like a gimlet going through a nice soft piece of cheese," as Ned expressed it. They were all delighted with the performance of the new invention, and promised themselves an early and successful strike.

But this rapid progress did not keep up long. After the first hundred feet or so, the ground became harder, and they often encountered rocks that slowed up even Tom's marvelous drill. It kept hammering away, though, and gradually thrust through obstacles that would have splintered and shattered any ordinary well-boring outfit.

Deeper and deeper grew the hole, and heavier and heavier grew the pipe as it was sunk through the earth's crust. The big derrick creaked and

groaned, and they had to stop drilling for several days while they added massive beams to the structure to reënforce it. Then drilling was resumed, but as the shaft sank deeper and deeper, and still with no sign of oil, one member after another of the party began to get discouraged. At first they would hardly admit this, even to themselves, but at last the facts had to be faced.

Mr. Damon had arrived a few days before the strengthening of the derrick. At first he had been his usual bright and voluble self, but as day followed day even his good spirits died away, and at length he put in words what the others had been thinking for some time past.

"Bless my oil cups, Tom, I'm the last man in the world to want to discourage you, but it begins to look to me as though there wasn't a drop of oil on this whole farm—except what they burn in the lamps at night."

"I must admit that it begins to look that way, as you say," Tom replied. "But don't forget that more than once oil has been struck at greater depths than we've penetrated so far. Why, we're not down a thousand feet yet, and the famous 'spouter' well didn't break until they'd gone down to nearly fourteen hundred. Besides, we've struck a softer stratum of earth now, and the old drill is beginning to bite through in fine style once more."

"That new drill of yours has done wonders, and if you let it go I think it would reach China eventually, but even then it might not strike an oil deposit. Why, bless my good, muscular right arm, if you go down much farther, you'll have to strengthen your derrick again. A thousand feet of iron pipe weighs something, let me tell you."

"Well, if the derrick breaks, we'll build a new one," returned Tom, doggedly. "I've got a hunch that there's oil under this farm, and I want pretty good proof that there isn't before I give up looking for it. Besides, it isn't only ourselves that we've got to think of. Can't you imagine how disappointed Mr. Goby and his daughter would be if we had to admit failure?"

"Yes, and then there's the Hankinshaw gang, too," chimed in Ned. "They'd have the laugh on us good and plenty if we went to all this trouble and then didn't get anything after all. We'd just be saving them the expense of doing the work themselves."

"Very true. But you've got to look at this from a business viewpoint," came from Mr. Damon. "Every ten feet you go deeper now will cost you many times more than the same distance did at first, and if the chances seem all against you, it's better policy to take your losses and get out while you've got something left.

That blessed hunch of yours, Tom, may prove to be a very expensive one before you're through."

"That's very true, Mr. Damon. But remember that it hasn't cost us nearly as much to drill this hole as it would if we had reached the same depth with the ordinary drilling equipment. I think we'd better add a little more bracing to the derrick and drill through another hundred feet or so. If we don't strike oil here, I want to feel that we did our best, anyway. There may be oil within ten feet of the drill point right now."

Tom's confidence and eagerness were infectious, and while Mr. Damon still shook his head doubtfully and blessed everything he could think of, it was finally decided to "carry on" a little while longer. Ned, while still unconvinced, did not advance any further arguments against a continuation of the drilling, as he knew how bitterly disappointed Carol would be if they failed in the undertaking.

Day followed day at the scene of the drilling, and still there was the same heartbreaking lack of success. Deeper and deeper went the drill, faster now, but still with no result. Finally their supply of pipe ran out, and it was almost a week before they could get more—a week during which Tom paced restlessly about the confines of the farm, counting the minutes until they

could resume operations. The time was not entirely wasted, however, as they added some heavy shoring to the derrick, together with some new crossbeams to support those that were bending and splitting under the tremendous strain.

In drilling for oil, as the drill bores a hole through the earth's crust, lengths of wrought-iron pipe are lowered into the hole to keep the earth from caving in and filling the shaft. When one length of pipe, usually twelve to fifteen feet, is all the way in, another length is coupled on to it, and this in turn is sunk as the drill goes deeper. Now, the entire weight of this pipe is supported by a wooden—or, in some cases, steel—framework, which is erected over the boring. One length of four-inch pipe is not such a trifling weight, and when dozens of these lengths are coupled together, their combined weight becomes enormous. Quite often the pipe or its supports will break, and then the whole length drops down into the hole and has to be fished out again before operations can be resumed. This is often a very difficult job, and may hold up progress for many days. In the feverish rush to get the shaft sunk, derricks are often overloaded until they fall under the strain, often badly injuring or killing the workmen, and in any event causing delay and expense.

Tom and his friends had guarded as far as

possible against these accidents, and so far had had no trouble in that direction. But with every length of pipe that was added to that already in the hole, the chance of an accident grew greater.

However, Tom, with characteristic grit, had determined to see the enterprise through to a finish, and the others of the party, seeing that he was not to be dissuaded, concealed as far as possible their own despondency as to the outcome.

"Bless my suspenders, Tom Swift, you look as though you had lost your last friend!" exclaimed Mr. Damon, one day. "The world won't come to an end just because we've happened to run out of pipe. We'll have more in a few days, and in the meantime you ought to be getting a rest instead of pacing up and down like a wild animal in its cage. You'll make yourself sick if you don't look out—bless my pill box, but you will!"

"I'll get well fast enough when we strike oil," Tom assured him.

"When we strike oil! Bless my time piece! What about now? Now, Tom Swift?"

Tom laughed, but merely reiterated that he would be well enough when the oil began to flow.

"That's all right. But in the meantime, why

not be sociable?" came from Ned, as he linked his arm with that of his friend. "You take hold of him on the other side, Mr. Damon, and we'll trot him up to the farmhouse and give him a good home-cooked meal. In other words, we'll feed the brute."

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE VERGE

In the big comfortable kitchen of the farmhouse a delicious supper was being prepared and Carol was busily engaged in setting the good things on the table when Tom, Ned and Mr. Damon entered. She had seen them coming, but had immediately retreated from the window when she saw Ned looking in her direction, and now tried to pretend that she had not been on the lookout at all.

But Mr. Damon was not inclined to let her off so easily. Although he had known the Gobys but a few days, the jovial and eccentric man already seemed like an old friend of the family, and was very popular with them.

"I thought I saw you at the window, Carol, as we came along," he said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Were you looking for any one in particular?"

"No, not at all. I just happened to glance out, and there you were coming along. You

all looked hungry, too, so I thought I'd better hurry and serve supper," she answered demurely.

During the meal, Mr. Goby dropped something of his usual sad manner and became talkative. He told them of many interesting incidents in the surrounding country, for which he entertained a deep affection, and predicted great things in the future.

"The country is rich any way you look at it," he proclaimed, after they had left the table and were in the living room. "If your land is fertile, you can make money out of raising crops and cattle on the surface, and if it's barren you stand a good chance of finding riches under the surface. My son always used to say that you were bound to do well with it one way or the other, and I guess he was right."

"Bless my posterity!" cried Mr. Damon. "Your son? Why, I didn't know you had a boy. Neither you nor Carol has ever mentioned him. Tell us about him."

Mr. Damon was all interest, as were also the others.

"Oh, yes," replied Mr. Goby. "I have a son, and a fine big fellow he is. But he hasn't been home for a long time now. He hasn't even written lately. I guess he must have forgotten his father and sister," and there was a note of sadness and longing in the blind man's voice.

"Sometimes the young people get so interested in the outside world that they don't realize how long the time seems to the folks at home," said Mr. Damon sympathetically. "What is your boy doing, Mr. Goby?"

"That's just what worries me more than anything else. He's gone fairly crazy over airplanes, and the last we heard of him he was flying one for some inventor who was developing a new type. I'm afraid that he may have met with some accident, and that's why we haven't heard from him for so long."

"Oh, flying in an airplane is safe enough," remarked Tom. "I've traveled a good many thousands of miles that way and never got anything worse than a scratch to show for it. What is your son's first name, Mr. Goby? I may have heard of him somewhere. Or if I don't know him myself, I have a wide acquaintance among flying men and can make some inquiries among them."

"It's an unusual name," replied the blind man. "But it's one that his grandfather carried before him, and so we gave it to him. His full name is Hitt Goby."

"Hitt Goby," Tom repeated, with a puzzled look on his face. "I don't think I ever heard the name before, and yet there is something familiar about it."

"Same here," remarked Ned. "Hitt Goby. Hitt Goby. Say, Tom," he added, with sudden excitement, "do you suppose it could be the aviator we rescued in the woods? You know we thought he said his name was Hillobie, but he was half unconscious and it might have been Hitt Goby."

"By George, I believe you're right!" replied Tom, jumping to his feet in great excitement and beginning to pace the room. "We'll have to wire to Shopton right away and find out."

"Bless my shoe laces!" gasped Mr. Damon, and then sat staring about him.

"What do you mean? What happened to my son?" demanded the blind man, in great agitation.

He had risen to his feet and stood trembling, his face the color of ashes. Tom sprang to his side and supported him as he swayed dizzily.

"You said that he was half unconscious when you rescued him," cried Carol, sudden tears in her eyes. "How did he get hurt? How badly was he hurt? Oh, tell us quickly."

"Don't be frightened," said Ned quietly, taking her hand. "He wasn't fatally hurt. He was getting along all right the last time we saw him. Perhaps, after all, it wasn't your brother. Have you a picture of him?"

"Yes," replied Carol, her first apprehensions

relieved by what Ned said. "I have one up on my bureau. I'll run up and get it."

She flew upstairs, and a moment later returned with the photograph. It had evidently been taken some years before, but the likeness was undeniable.

"That's the man," declared Tom, after a moment's inspection. Ned, who was looking over his shoulder, nodded in agreement.

"No doubt about it. Same eyes, same nose, same shaped head."

"Tell us all about it," cried Mr. Goby and Carol in the same breath, feverish with impatience.

In as few words as possible, Tom narrated the happenings of that memorable afternoon when the young aviator had fallen into the woods with his blazing plane.

"Broken leg! Broken ribs! My poor brother!" cried Carol, and, for a moment, her tears flowed, while Mr. Goby only by the greatest effort kept himself from following her example.

"But he's gotten all over those troubles," Tom assured them consolingly. "The last time I saw the head physician of the hospital he told me that both leg and ribs had healed perfectly."

"I can't thank you two young men enough for what you have done for my poor boy," said Mr. Goby, and Carol's eyes were bright with un-

spoken thanks through her tears. "But if he has got well again, why hasn't he left the hospital and come home? And why hasn't he written?"

This was a poser for Tom, who had carefully avoided saying anything about Hitt Goby's mental condition. That, he felt, would be almost equivalent to a death blow. He almost began to regret that the matter had been mentioned at all.

"Oh, there might be a dozen reasons for either of those things," he said evasively. "In the first place, they might keep him at the hospital even after the breaks had mended until he had fully gotten back his strength. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll telegraph the first thing to-morrow morning from Copperhead to the hospital and find out just how matters stand."

Nothing else was talked of that night, and the boys had to answer questions bearing on every little detail of the young aviator's rescue. They glossed over their own part of the work as much as possible, but Mr. Goby and Carol overwhelmed them with thanks for the part they had played.

Tom and Ned had heavy hearts, however, when at last they found themselves alone in their room. They looked at each other gloomily.

"How can we ever tell them if it turns out

that the boy has lost his mind?" groaned Tom, in a whisper.

"In that case, it would be a thousand times better if he were dead," responded Ned gloomily. "But we've got to buck up and hope for the best. It's a good while since we saw him, and by this time he'll perhaps be all right in mind as well as body. At any rate, we'll know by to-morrow night."

The first thing after breakfast the next morning, Tom, in the *Winged Arrow,* flew over to Copperhead. There he dispatched a telegram to Dr. Sherwood, asking him to tell him the whole truth, whether the news was good or bad, about young Goby's condition, and to wire him, if possible, so that he could get the message by noon.

He had a considerable amount of business to transact in Copperhead, and he was glad that he had, as it occupied the time and made the waiting more endurable. But by noon he was back in the telegraph station, only to be told that no message had come for him. He waited around for nearly an hour, fairly consumed with impatience. But at last the operator looked up from his clicking key.

"Something for you coming in now, Mr. Swift," he announced. "I'll have it all in a minute or two."

Tom hastened over and watched him as he

transcribed the message and handed it to him. Tom glanced over it and let out a whoop of exultation that made the operator smile. Then he rushed out and jumped into the plane and sent it whizzing over to the Goby farm.

Carol had been on the watch for him, and came running out of the house to the open space where he made his landing. A glance at his face told her that he was the bearer of good tidings.

Had it been anything of less importance, Tom might have teased her a little before he told her. As it was, he thrust the yellow slip in her hand as soon as he reached her side. She read it eagerly, pressed it to her heart, and then, with a word of thanks, hurried to the house.

"It's all right, Father!" she cried, as she burst into the living room, where the blind man was eagerly awaiting her. "Listen to this!" And with hands that trembled so that she could hardly hold the paper she read:

"Young Goby entirely recovered. Body and mind in perfect condition. Will leave the hospital in a day or two and go directly to his father's home.

"SHERWOOD."

The blind man opened his arms and Carol

sank into them, father and daughter weeping happy tears together.

Tom had not followed Carol, for he knew that just then she wanted no other company than her father. He hunted up Ned and Mr. Damon and imparted the good news to them, and they had a little jubilee of their own.

At the well, however, things were not going so happily. The new supply of pipe and couplings had arrived, and Tom had started the drill again, but still they seemed as far as ever from oil. For two days more the drill ate steadily down, and length after length of pipe was engulfed in the deepening hole. They had now penetrated the earth's crust to a distance of 1,300 feet without a sign of oil, and any one with less than Tom's indomitable courage would have quit the seemingly hopeless struggle in weariness and disgust. But Tom was not yet ready to acknowledge himself beaten.

"We'll go down another hundred feet," he said, while Mr. Damon shook his head and even Ned looked gloomy and downcast. "I know we can't go on forever, and if we don't strike oil in the next hundred feet I'll own up that we're beaten and we'll have to make the best of it. Fourteen hundred feet will be our limit. And I guess that won't be so bad, even if we don't reach oil. We can say we died game, anyway."

"Why, bless my eyes and ears, Tom Swift, I must say I have more admiration for your grit than for your judgment," cried Mr. Damon.

"If he had taken my advice and stopped two weeks ago, think of all the money we'd have saved, not to mention the time and worry. I think we're foolish to go another hundred feet," grumbled Ned.

"But I know that if his heart is set on it, nothing we can say will change him, Ned," resumed Mr. Damon. "I wish you luck, my boy," he went on, turning to Tom. "But it looks dark and dreary to me."

"Well, I'll stick it out, anyway," replied Tom doggedly. "The drill is going fast now, and it won't take us more than a few days at most to go that extra hundred. I'll promise to quit then, but not an inch sooner."

This conversation took place just before the men knocked off work at noontime. They were a disgruntled crew, for they had all set their hearts on striking a "gusher," and were almost as downcast over the prospect of failure as Ned and Mr. Damon. After lunch they gathered around to resume work in a mechanical manner, and Tom could easily see that they had given up hope.

The drill was set in operation once more. It had been going only a short time. Suddenly a

far-off rumbling sound came up the shaft. At the same time a pungent odor of raw petroleum came drifting out of the boring.

In a second all was wild excitement.

"We're close to oil, sir!" exclaimed the foreman of the drilling gang. "A few more strokes of the drill, and we'll be through into it. Better be ready to cap the well before we go any farther."

Tom was about to issue the necessary orders, when suddenly, deep under the earth's surface, there was an explosion that rocked the solid ground on which they stood! From the boring came a whistling sound, resembling the escape of steam under high pressure!

CHAPTER XX

CAPPING THE GUSHER

FOR a moment the men about the well stared at one another in silent consternation. Then,

"Watch yourselves!" yelled the foreman. "There's oil coming, and coming fast! Get the capping rigging ready, men, and move lively!"

The hissing sound grew louder. Suddenly the drill came hurtling out of the well, impelled by the tremendous pressure behind it, and shot through the heavy beams of the derrick as though they had been cardboard. Following the drill came a shower of sand and small stones. Those about the well were forced to race for shelter until the last of the debris had been blown out by the force of the escaping gas and the shower ceased.

Then the men came racing back, bringing with them the valve and clamps that were to be used to cap the well after the oil started to flow. As yet, nothing had come from the well but gas, but they knew the oil could not be far off. Under

the terrific pressure of the outflowing gas, the heavy derrick began to crumble, and in a short time the whole upper part of it came apart and the stout timbers were whirled aloft and scattered far and wide like so many matchsticks.

The hissing grew louder, and a heavy rumbling sound vibrated along the pipe line, growing steadily louder and more menacing. In a few minutes more this sound had reached a huge crescendo, and then, with a shriek like that of an imprisoned demon liberated, the oil reached the surface and shot a hundred feet into the air in a huge, writhing black geyser that flared out at the top and deluged everything within a radius of hundreds of feet with raw glistening petroleum. As the oil fell, it rapidly collected into large pools, and started running off in every direction where there was a slight slope.

For a few seconds after the tremendous fountain started, Tom stood almost petrified by the magnitude of the spectacle. But the sight of the precious oil running to waste in such huge quantities galvanized Ned and Mr. Damon into action. Mr. Damon danced around, wild with excitement.

"Bless my oil drill!" he shouted. "We've struck it! We've struck it!"

"That wonderful drill of yours has done the trick!" cried Ned, wringing his friend's hand.

"We've got the oil," said Tom, who, though pale with excitement, still kept his head. "The thing to do now is to save it."

The capping outfit with which they hoped to stem the tremendous force of the gusher was of a special design that Tom had worked out. It consisted of an extra heavy gate valve set in a cast steel framework, with heavy steel clamps for holding the entire assembly to the end of the well pipe. In addition to the actual valve and holding mechanism, Tom had contrived an ingenious screw mechanism with which to place the valve over the stream of oil.

"Get busy with that valve," shouted Tom, his voice rising high above the din.

This was no easy task. In many similar wells, attempts had been made to imprison the oil with heavy timber boxes and framework, but the force of the oil stream is so great that these devices were usually shot up bodily into the air, and only came down in the form of kindling wood. Tom knew this, and in designing his capping mechanism had placed his reliance on steel as being the material best suited to withstand the strain.

Now the time had come when his mechanism was to be put to the test. The riggers soon had the valve and clamping framework as close to the well as they could get, also the sliding carriage,

with its rails bolted to concrete foundations that had been prepared for it previously. Everything was now ready for the test, and in feverish excitement they prepared to move the valve over the well.

"Steady, men, steady!" shouted Tom.

The spray of oil and vapor was so dense near the well that it was impossible to get closer than about twenty-five feet and breathe. As it was, every man of the party was soaked and drenched with the clinging oil. Their clothes hung limply about them, and were so saturated and heavy that it was difficult for them even to move.

"Keep your heads, boys," cautioned Tom, who was now as cool and self-possessed as ever.

Tom had foreseen that his apparatus would have to be worked at some distance from the well, and he had provided a long handle made of piping, which was connected to the screw mechanism. Now the foreman and several of his men began to turn the screw, and the valve moved slowly toward the roaring, spouting stream of oil.

It seemed almost incredible that any mechanism devised by man could withstand that tremendous force. Some of the men actually expected to see the heavy steel castings bent and broken as easily as a man would snap a stick across his knee. But Tom's designing had been

thorough, and he had personally superintended the construction of the mechanism from his plans. Everything was extra heavy and of the best obtainable quality, as it had need to be for such an undertaking as this. When the valve reached the casing, it held true to its place, and the shaft of oil was diverted slightly to one side. The men held their breath as with anxious eyes they followed the progress of the valve across the casing.

Slowly but steadily the drilling crew turned at the screw, slowly the valve moved onward over the casing. The stream of oil roared and hissed as it writhed and twisted about this obstacle, and seemed to be trying to tear it bodily from its anchors. A heavy spray filled the air, and although the men at the screw were half-drowned in oil, they stuck gamely to their post.

Farther and farther the column of oil bent, smashing against the steel that barred its path as though determined to destroy it by the force of its mighty onrush. Inexorably the heavy steel carriage, man's challenge to nature's might, moved onward, as steady, unhurried, and invincible as fate itself.

Now the column of oil was deflected at an acute angle, farther and farther, until suddenly it divided into two columns, one roaring straight

upward again through the valve, while the other was deflected more and more toward the horizontal.

"It's working all right!" cried Ned exultantly.

"Seems to be," agreed Tom, watching like a hawk.

Gradually the vertical stream, thin at first, became thicker and heavier, and the other stream grew thinner, until finally the entire shaft of oil was roaring and rushing through the open valve.

Tom and Ned shouted and cheered, while Mr. Damon blessed everything he could think of.

"Bless my dividends!" he cried. "Tom, my boy, you're a wonder-worker, a magician!"

"I knew you'd do it, old boy!" exclaimed Ned, as he clapped his chum on the shoulder.

"It does look as though we'd won out," admitted Tom, less exuberant but no less excited than his friends. "But now let's see if the valve will hold when we close it. The pressure is going to be something fierce."

The drillers were hardly less elated, and shouted and pounded each other unmercifully. Then they fell to work again, and soon everything was ready for closing the valve.

Tom had made another long handle to connect with the wheel of the valve, but he was too impatient to wait for this to be used. Drawing a

long breath, he dashed through the spray of oil close to the well and started turning the hand wheel that operated the gate valve.

From a circular column, the shaft of oil assumed a crescent shape, growing narrower as the gate closed. Thinner and thinner grew the stream, until at length the valve was entirely closed. Then there came a tense moment of waiting. With the tremendous pressure of the imprisoned oil backing up against it, would the valve mechanism stand the strain? Would the framework supporting the valve hold?

CHAPTER XXI

THE INQUISITIVE STRANGER

EVERY man stood tense, eyes riveted on the valve.

Attached to the lower part of the capping mechanism was a pressure gauge. As the valve closed, the needle of the gauge began creeping steadily around the dial. When the valve was completely closed, the pressure mounted steadily. Five hundred—six—seven hundred pounds to the square inch, and still the needle moved around the dial. When it finally came to rest, it indicated a confined or "rock" pressure in the well of nine hundred and fifty pounds per square inch!

"Will she hold?" asked Ned anxiously.

"Five minutes will tell," answered Tom.

Tom had designed his capping mechanism with a generous allowance for overload, and he had no fear of failure, but to the others it seemed incredible that anything could withstand such a tremendous pressure. But as the first anxious moments of waiting passed and nothing hap-

pened, their tense nerves relaxed and they ventured to draw long breaths again.

Tom and Ned and Mr. Damon shook hands solemnly, and then in turn shook hands with the drilling boss and each member of the crew. Then, as every man was almost exhausted with his strenuous efforts and the well was safely brought in and capped, all work was discontinued for the time.

"Guess we'll call it a day," said Tom.

"And the best day's work you've ever done!" exclaimed Ned.

"Bless my shower bath!" cried Mr. Damon. "We're as black as coal heavers. Better go and clean up. And these clothes of ours are done for."

"Guess we can afford to buy others now that we're oil magnates," chuckled Tom happily.

The roar of the gusher had been heard for miles around, and in a few hours people were coming from every direction to view the new "strike." Automobiles, wagons, and buggies came in a constant stream to the Goby farmhouse, and thence to the scene of the drilling. Veteran oil men were amazed to find the new well already capped, and had it not been for the pools of petroleum and the dripping trees in the vicinity, they would have doubted that oil had really been struck.

Usually when oil is struck a week or more is spent in designing and making a capping device, while the oil runs to waste, or, at best, is partially reclaimed by pumping it out of the hollows where it has collected. Tom had steered clear of this folly, and when the emergency came he was properly equipped to meet it.

The doubts of the visitors were soon dissipated, especially after they viewed the pressure gauge, which now indicated nine hundred and seventy-five pounds to the square inch.

"Can she stand it?" was the question on every lip.

Tom himself was somewhat worried over this mounting pressure, as he knew that if it kept increasing indefinitely no mechanism could withstand its force. But the pressure never went higher than nine hundred and seventy-eight pounds, and when they later got the well to delivering oil regularly, it dropped somewhat.

The news of the strike soon spread beyond the neighboring towns, got into the papers, and became a subject of nation-wide interest. Newspapers published front-page stories of the new gusher, and in a few days there was a rush of speculators and "wildcatters" from all over the country. There were also many representatives and buyers from big oil companies, who were

anxious to buy the Goby farm at almost any figure, and also the adjoining land.

Tom, Mr. Damon and Ned, however, had not been idle in the days following the strike, and they had quietly bought up large tracts of land, on most of which they had had options before oil was discovered. They sold out a few of the smaller of these holdings, and received enough from them to pay all the cost of the drilling and leave a handsome sum besides.

One day a keen-eyed business man separated himself from the group of people who were usually to be found about the well, drawn there by the fascination that always attaches to an oil strike, and introduced himself to Tom. The card he tendered showed that he was the Texas representative of one of the biggest oil companies in the country.

"Struck it rich, I see," he remarked, with a smile. "From the way that well came in it promises to be one of the biggest gushers in this section. Let's see, how long have you been digging?"

Tom mentioned the date on which he and his companions had started work.

"Ah," said the stranger, after a moment of mental figuring, "then I gather that you must have dug down four or five hundred feet before you struck oil."

"More than that," replied Tom. "Fourteen hundred feet is nearer the figure."

The newcomer looked bewildered.

"Then I must have misunderstood you as to the time you started drilling," he remarked.

"I guess not," said Tom, repeating the same date as before.

"Oh," said the man. "I suppose you must have worked in three shifts day and night," he added.

"No, Mr. Blythe," replied Tom, with a glance at the card he held in his hand. "We've had only the ordinary day crew."

"Then," returned Mr. Blythe, "you must have worked in softer soil than I knew was to be found in this section of Texas. Perhaps you didn't come across rock of any account."

"On the contrary," replied Tom, with secret amusement, for he had fathomed the cause of his interrogator's perplexity, "my foreman tells me that we had to bore through some of the most stubborn rock that he has come across in his long experience. And the specimens we brought up confirm this."

Mr. Blythe threw up his hands in a gesture of amazement. Tom's sincerity was apparent, but what he said seemed incredible.

"I give it up!" he exclaimed. "According to all precedent in this oil field, you couldn't pos-

sibly have gone down more than five hundred feet at the outside in the time and under the conditions you mention. What's the answer?"

"The answer is that in digging this well I've used a drill hitherto unused—one of my own invention," replied Tom.

In an instant Mr. Blythe was aflame with excitement.

CHAPTER XXII

RAD TURNS UP

"You invented it yourself?" cried Mr. Blythe. "And you've dug this well in a third of the time that the ordinary drill requires? Why, Mr. Swift, do you know that you have made one of the most important inventions of this century? Where is the drill? Can I look at it? Have you patented it? Is it for sale? Are you open to a proposition?"

The questions came tumbling from him one after the other in a way that showed plainly how this astute business man had been shaken out of his customary calm.

His agitation helped to confirm Tom's own conviction that he possessed a fortune in his drill. And since he had it, he was in no haste to let it go to the first bidder. Others would want it too, and he had determined to let them bid against each other. He was not to be rushed off his feet.

"I can't go into that now, Mr. Blythe," he said. "In the first place, I have my hands full in ar-

ranging to get my oil to market. Then, in such an important thing as the sale of my patent, if I should determine to sell it, I must think things over carefully."

Mr. Blythe urged and argued, but Tom was not to be shaken.

"Promise me this then," said Mr. Blythe at last. "Promise that you won't make any disposition of it until I have had a chance to get in touch with my company and they have had an opportunity to make you an offer."

"I can't make promises," replied Tom.

"Not if I pay you a handsome sum down for your promise to wait three days before you commit yourself to any one else?" asked Mr. Blythe, drawing out his checkbook from his pocket. "That doesn't put you under any obligation to accept our offer. You can refuse that offer if you like. It simply gives us three days' time to get in a bid."

"Put up your checkbook, Mr. Blythe," replied Tom, with a friendly smile. "I don't want to be bound in any way. You've got the telegraph and the long distance telephone at your disposal, and you can communicate with your New York office. When I have your actual offer in my hand, if your people choose to make one, I promise to give it fair and careful consideration. Further than that I can't go."

Baffled for the moment, Mr. Blythe bade Tom a hasty farewell, jumped into his car, and put off toward Copperhead at a speed that threatened to break the laws. Tom looked after him with a smile, and then turned to matters that claimed his immediate attention.

Ned and Mr. Damon were interested and amused when Tom told them that night of his interview with Mr. Blythe.

"Bless my prophetic powers!" cried Mr. Damon. "I told you they'd all be crazy to get hold of it."

"Let them worry," said Ned, with a grin. "It will be good for their souls."

Later Tom gave them a bit of news.

"I'm expecting Rad down here to-morrow or next day," he remarked. "It looks as though we'd be in this part of the country for quite a time now, and I thought I might as well let him come along. In the last letter I had from Dad, he said that Rad seemed miserable and didn't know what to do with himself. Said he was making a nuisance of himself about the house. So I wrote and told him to send him down."

Sure enough, the following day the old negro arrived at the farm. Tom had looked for him by a later train, and so there was no one to meet Rad and he had walked the four miles from the station. He was overjoyed at seeing Tom, and

showed every tooth in a glistening smile as his young master met him at the gate.

"Dis sho' am a sight fo' sore eyes, Marse Tom, it sho' am! Seemed lak Ah wouldn't nebber git here, and den some fool niggah down in de town give me de wrong directions, an' Ah thought Ah nebber would arrive."

"Well, I'm mighty glad that you are here, Rad. I felt sure that you'd like this better than loafing around back home. How do you like the little you've seen of this oil country?"

"Cain't say dat Ah t'inks much of it," he replied, with a gloomy shake of his kinky head. "It seems powerful hilly and all dat, but Ah reckon it cain't be helped."

"No," laughed Tom. "These hills look as though they had been put here to stay. But there's plenty to eat, and Mr. Goby's daughter is a good housekeeper and has a fine cook, so possibly you'll come to like it better after awhile."

"Dere's nothin' like havin' plenty to eat," declared Rad, while his glistening countenance assumed its usual happy expression. "Pears to me Ah feels a bit hungry right now," and he looked hopefully at Tom.

"I imagine dinner will be ready in about an hour, if you think you can survive that long," Tom informed him.

"Reckon Ah'll have to stick it out some way,"

answered the colored man resignedly. "Wharat am dis yere oil well, Marse Tom? Does you let a bucket down into it an' tote up some oil when you needs it?"

"Not exactly," answered Tom, with a grin. "The hard thing to do with this well is to keep the oil in. For some reason or other, it seems very anxious to escape. It was spouting up a hundred feet into the air the day we tapped it."

Rad rolled his eyes in astonishment, but was too overcome to make any remark. When Tom showed him the capped well he was visibly disappointed. It is hard to say what he expected to see, but evidently the quiet appearance of the well did not impress him much.

"Ah thought dat dis yere well would be raisin' all kinds o' ructions, but it looks jest as peaceable as kin be," he observed. "A fool niggah down at de depot tole me it made a noise dat a feller could heah fo' miles and miles, but Ah doan heah even a whispah fum it. Reckon dat man mus' have been jest a plain, ornary prevasticator."

"The trouble is, you arrived too late, Rad. You should have been here the day the well started. But don't let that worry you. There's apt to be plenty of noise and excitement around here before we see Shopton once more. I heard to-day that the Hankinshaw crowd is out after

our scalps, and we may have our hands full with them before long."

That Koku and Rad were glad to be reunited goes without saying, though they were soon engaged as lustily as ever in their vociferous but harmless verbal battles.

Tom had received word that morning from a friend in Copperhead that the Hankinshaw gang were furious over the news of his successful strike, and had sworn to get even by hook or crook. Tom was not sure that this warning should be taken seriously, and yet it might be well to be on his guard, so that afternoon he and Mr. Damon and Ned had a conference to discuss the matter. They decided that about all they could do was to keep a wary eye out for the first hostile move of their enemies, and trust to outwitting them if they could.

"I don't exactly see what they could do," mused Ned thoughtfully.

"Of course, there's always the possibility of personal violence," returned Tom. "I know that Hankinshaw hates me like poison and he wouldn't weep any bitter tears if something happened to me. But I've handled him before and I can handle him again if he starts anything."

"I know," faltered Ned. "But he's slippery and underhanded, and——"

"He might not face you in the open," put in

Mr. Damon anxiously. "There are a lot of desperate characters hanging around every new oil field, and he might hire some of them to do what he wouldn't dare to do himself. Be on your guard, my boy. Hankinshaw is a man to be reckoned with."

CHAPTER XXIII

A DASTARDLY PLOT

HANKINSHAW was indeed a man to be reckoned with. He was of a sullen and revengeful nature, and prided himself on always "getting even" with any one who crossed his will. For Tom and his friends he entertained an especially bitter feeling, not only because of the clashes at Shopton, but also because he had succeeded in persuading himself that Tom had "double crossed" him in getting the rights to the drilling on the Goby farm. In reality, Tom had been moved more by a desire to protect the blind man from being swindled than by a wish for his own personal gain.

However, as is common with men of his sort, Hankinshaw judged Tom by his own warped and twisted standards, and even before oil had been struck on the Goby farm he was planning to have revenge for the fancied injury. But when he learned that Tom had actually struck a gusher, his anger and chagrin knew no bounds. He saw the riches that he had thought to pocket himself

going to others, and the sight drove him fairly wild with rage. He immediately called his confederates together, that they might plan some way to bring about Tom's downfall.

They gathered in Hankinshaw's room at the hotel one evening about a week after the well had been tapped. Hankinshaw's partners were almost as bitter as he over their loss of the big gusher, and were prepared to follow him in any enterprise that promised revenge.

Hankinshaw, as the more forceful, had taken Thompson's place as leader, and he was the one who opened the conference.

"Well, boys, we've been done to the queen's taste," he began, as he smoked his vile pipe furiously. "That cub Tom Swift and his friends have put the kibosh on us good and proper. They've struck oil, and we're left out in the cold when we should be running that gusher ourselves right now. That being the case, are we going to take it lying down like dogs, or are we going to hit back?" and he glanced from one to the other with an ugly scowl on his face.

His companions shifted uneasily in their chairs and looked at each other.

"I'd like to hit back all right," said Thompson. "But all the same, I do not care to do anything that may land me in jail. I've kept clear of that so far, and I'm not anxious to begin."

"I feel the same way," agreed Bragden. "It's better to be safe than sorry. All the same, Hankinshaw, let's know what you have in mind."

Hankinshaw looked at them with a wicked gleam in his close-set eyes. "I'm not so particular as you fellows," he sneered. "When a man has done me an injury, I aim to get even with him and I am none too squeamish as to how I do it. I've thought up a scheme that will do the trick for us, and there is not enough risk in it even to scare you pikers."

"Cut out that rough stuff, Hankinshaw," said Thompson. "That isn't going to get us anywhere. Lay your cards on the table."

"All right, then; here's the dope. You both know oil wells, and you know that when a gusher comes in it spreads out over the landscape quite considerable before it's got under control, don't you?"

They both nodded, and waited expectantly for him to go on.

"I suppose you also know that if an oil well gets afire, it's a mighty hard thing to put it out, don't you?"

Again they nodded, while a gleam of comprehension crept into their eyes.

"Well, now, the woods and grass are pretty dry at this season of the year, and if one of us happened to drop a match into the grass when

the wind was blowing toward the Goby farm, I imagine the fire might travel real fast, especially after it reached the oil soaked belt around the well. What do you think?" and he glanced keenly at his accomplices.

Thompson considered for a moment, his brows knitted in a malignant scowl.

"When it comes to planning, Hankinshaw," he said, "you're there with the goods. If that well could be set afire we will have taken a good long step toward getting even, and I won't feel so bad about the money we have lost. But as far as the actual work is concerned, count me out of it. Get as many roughnecks together as you need, and I'll bear my share of the expense. I suppose you feel the same way, Bragden?" he added.

Bragden nodded his head.

"That's the way I feel about it," he agreed. "But when the thing happens, I am going to be out of town. I'll help bear whatever expense there may be in carrying out the plan."

"Leave me to hold the bag, eh?" Hankinshaw sneered. "Well, I didn't expect anything else," he added. "You have always looked to me for the rough stuff, but let it go at that. I'll take a chance; play a lone hand."

Thompson and Bragden chose to ignore the slur about their courage, and a conference followed on ways and means. When the gather-

ing broke up it had been agreed that Hankinshaw's nefarious scheme should be put into effect on the first night that conditions were favorable.

All unaware of their enemies' plotting, Tom and his companions were exceedingly busy with plans for getting the oil to market. They had already ordered several miles of eight-inch pipe, which they intended to run to Copperhead, the nearest town on the railroad. The time of delivery was uncertain, however, and until the pipe arrived, there was not much that could be done toward developing the well. They had secured a right-of-way for the pipe line over the adjoining farms, and were now anxious to get the oil running.

"It won't take us very long to lay the line, once we get the pipe," remarked Tom. "If only we had been absolutely sure that we were going to strike oil, we could have ordered it months ago, and had it here all ready and waiting now."

"Bless my thick skull! that's true, Tom," exclaimed Mr. Damon. "But none of us are prophets, and eight-inch pipe isn't the cheapest thing in the world to buy. That's one of the things we simply had to let go until we knew we had the oil to put through it. We don't need to worry, anyway. The main thing is that we've got the oil, and a week or so's delay won't hurt us. It will give us a chance to rest up."

Luckily for Tom and his friends, they did not have to have pumping stations, as their well was on comparatively high ground, and there was a continual slope from there to Copperhead. All they had to do was to run their eight-inch pipe line to the town and empty it into a concrete tank. This tank had already been started several days before, and they expected to have it completed by the time they got the oil line connected up.

Urgent telegraph and telephone calls hurried up shipments of pipe, and in a few days it began to come in. Tom directed the laying. The men all liked the young inventor and worked willingly and untiringly at his bidding, but at best it was slow work getting those four miles of pipe laid. In spite of his desire for speed, Tom would not allow any careless work, and each joint had to be made to his satisfaction before another could be bolted up.

They laid the pipe in shallow trenches and covered it a few inches deep with dirt. Length after length, it grew steadily.

It looked like plain sailing then, but for some unexplainable reason, after they had started the line from the well, the valve started to leak. Probably the tremendous pressure of the oil behind it had opened up some little flaw in the gate or seat, and oil started coming through—not in any great quantity, to be sure, but still there was

a constant stream, which ran through the pipe and made it difficult to join the sections together and kept the men constantly dripping with the thick brown liquid.

Tom would not admit it, but he was worried. He knew that the leak might get worse, that the valve might give out altogether and release the imprisoned oil. His first act was to telegraph for a new valve. After that, he gave orders to have the new pipe line disconnected close to the well. This stopped the oil running through the line, but of course it ran out into the ground instead and trickled down the hill in every direction. However, the leakage was not large as yet, and if it got no worse would not be a serious thing. It meant some loss of oil, but it would be for only a few days, until they could get the line connected to the tank in Copperhead.

"Bless my forebodings! I don't like it, just the same," said Mr. Damon, with a shake of his head. "It takes away my confidence, Tom. If that valve can leak a little, it can leak a lot, and I expect almost any old time to hear it let go."

"It's possible," admitted Tom. "No use worrying about it, though. I don't like to see our good oil going to waste any more than you do, but I guess it won't amount to very much, after all. There'll be plenty left in the well, Mr. Damon."

"Dat stuff doan look like oil, nohow," said Rad, who was an interested spectator of all that was going on. "Dat looks mo' lak good ole molasses to me."

"Well, maybe it is," said Tom. "Taste it and see, Rad."

Rad did as he was bidden, but instantly made a terrible face and looked reproachfully at the young inventor.

"Is it molasses, Rad?" asked Tom, trying hard to keep a straight face.

"No, sah, dat ain't no molasses. It's de worst stuff dat dis niggah evah tasted, an' Ah doan want no mo' of it. Guess Ah'll have to take a good swig o' watah to git de taste outen ma mouf," and Rad made for the water bucket.

"Live and learn," laughed Mr. Damon, his anxiety over the leak forgotten for the moment. "Bless you, Rad, things aren't always what they seem."

"Ah believes you-all now, Mistah Damon," said the old negro, as he ruefully scrubbed at his lips in an effort to get rid of the taste. "Nex' time Ah lets some odder fool niggah do de samplin'."

That night at the farmhouse, while the others of the company were chatting about the events of the day, Mr. Damon stepped to the window to take note of the weather, as he was accustomed

to do. As he reached the window he gave a startled exclamation.

"Bless my fire insurance!" he cried. "There's a big fire. Looks as though it might be in Copperhead, only it's hardly far enough away for that."

At his words, the others jumped up and crowded to the window.

"I should say it isn't as far as Copperhead!" ejaculated Tom. "Why, that fire is close, and getting closer every minute!" and he dashed out of the house, followed by the others.

In the north was a lurid glare, growing brighter every moment. A fresh breeze blew toward them, bearing a stifling smoke, with now and then a floating spark. The long, dry grass was on fire, and, blown by a lively breeze, was rapidly approaching the oil well!

CHAPTER XXIV

FIGHTING THE FIRE

"THE well!" shouted Tom. "It's coming toward the well!"

Terror gripped at the hearts of all. The men stood for an instant as though paralyzed. Carol wrung her hands in anguish.

"With this wind blowing, nothing can stop it," groaned Mr. Damon, his face white with excitement.

"But even if it gets that far, the well is capped!" exclaimed Ned, catching at a shred of hope.

"It'll catch fire just the same," said Tom, as he remembered the leaking gate valve and the oil-soaked hillside. "Once let the flames begin to lick round that casing, and there'll be a tremendous explosion. Don't let's fool ourselves. We've got to stop it—*got* to stop it! Carol, you run to the 'phone. Call up the neighbors. Call up Copperhead. Get all the fire-fighters you can. You men come with me."

Hankinshaw and his gang had done their

work well. The night was an ideal one for their project, the wind being strong and from the north where there were dense thickets and many trees to furnish fuel for the fire, which was now advancing at terrifying speed.

"Everybody get shovels," yelled Tom. "I'll get the men up," and he dashed toward the cabin where the drillers slept. Usually, Koku slept there too, and Tom hoped to find him, for he knew what the giant's great strength and tireless endurance were worth in an emergency.

Luckily Koku was in the cabin with the men, but it was almost impossible to get him awake. The others had all rushed out with shovels and axes before Tom finally shook him into consciousness.

"What's matter?" he muttered, as he scrambled sleepily to his feet. "Time get up?"

"You bet it is—high time," replied Tom, and the excitement in his voice effectually aroused the faithful giant. "The woods to the north of the oil well are on fire, and the flames are coming toward us fast. We've got to put that fire out, Koku."

"I do that," declared Koku confidently.

"Get a shovel and follow me," ordered Tom. "You might take an axe along too," he added. "The only chance we've got is to clear a space ahead of the flames that they can't jump over.

If we can do that, we may save the well yet," and he and Koku started at a fast run toward the oncoming flames.

The fire had not yet reached the oil belt, but it was not over a mile from it when the young inventor and his faithful giant arrived on the scene. Everybody that could handle a shovel or an axe was there, but they were working without leadership until Tom arrived. He took control at once, and in a few minutes everybody knew just what he was expected to do.

By this time the heat of the fire was intense, and the smoke enveloped those fighting it in a stifling cloud. Hot sparks and embers floated over their heads, and threatened at any moment to kindle new fires nearer the oil well. Tom detailed three of the drillers to watch for these incipient fires and smother them or beat them out before they got serious. Ned and Mr. Damon, together with the rest of the drilling gang and such of the neighbors as had come to help, he put to work digging ditches and clearing the ground in the path of the approaching flames of its dried underbrush, while he and Koku set about chopping down some of the trees that grew on the hillside.

They were not large trees, scarcely more than saplings in fact, but there were a great many of them.

"Now, Koku," shouted Tom, "work as you've never worked before."

"Me do," answered the giant, as he tightened his hold on the axe.

Tom himself was an expert at wielding an axe, and he swung with a tireless stroke that soon showed results, but for every sapling that he brought down Koku felled two. In the red glare of the oncoming fire the giant worked like a demon, his great muscles swelling and knotting as he swung the blade of his axe in gleaming circles. The heat increased until it became so unbearable that everybody else had to fall back, but he hardly seemed to feel it. He kept at work until the fire was almost on top of him, and Tom yelled to him to come back. But by that time they had cut a long swath along the side of the hill between the fire and the well. Other workers had pretty well cleared up the underbrush and drawn the bulk of it back, apparently out of the reach of the oncoming flames.

But they had reckoned without the wind, which blew strongly and fanned the fire into a fury that recognized no check. As it reached the edge of the cleared space it died down slightly while it ate along the edge as though it were endowed with intelligence and was seeking out the easiest place to cross. The scorched and weary fire-fighters leaned on their tools and waited with

nerves tense to see if their efforts had prevailed. Had the night been still, the red enemy would have been conquered then and there from lack of fuel to feed upon, but the wind rose until it reached half a gale and carried on its wings blazing leaves and twigs that alighted on the far side of the cleared space. Here the fire found fresh fuel to feed upon, and resumed its devastating march toward the oil well.

Some of the fire-fighters were ready to throw down their tools and admit defeat. They had seen the fire demon at work before, and they knew how hard it was to bar his progress. Had it been left to them, they would have given in to what they considered the inevitable, and accepted defeat. But Tom, like a famous American commander, had "just begun to fight."

"Come on up farther, and we'll try again!" he yelled. "The wind is dying down a little, and this time we may stop it."

But this time he resorted to a stronger force than mere human labor. In a shack not far from the well was stored some nitro-glycerine, which they had bought when it seemed as though they might have to explode it to strike oil. It was not needed at that time, but now the thought of it flashed through Tom's mind, and he resolved to try it. He figured that by exploding the powerful nitro-glycerine he could plough up a deep

and wide trench that might effectually prevent the further progress of the fire.

"Come on, Koku!" he shouted, "I've got a job for you."

Followed by his giant retainer, he set off for the storage shack. When they reached it, Tom reached in his pocket for the key to the padlock. He fumbled about, but the key was gone—lost in the mad activities of that lurid night.

"We're up against it now, Koku!" exclaimed the young inventor, in desperation. "We've got to get into that shack, but the key is lost, and that's a strong padlock. How are we going to do it?"

For answer, Koku seized the padlock and, placing his foot against the door jamb, pulled until his powerful muscles stood out in ridges. There came a screech of nails being drawn through wood, padlock and hasp came flying off the door, while Koku staggered backward and almost fell from the force of his own exertions.

"Good enough!" exclaimed Tom. "Now, Koku, this is dangerous stuff to handle. If we fall with it, they'll never be able to find the pieces. Are you game to take the chance?"

"What you tell me, I do," replied Koku calmly.

Each took all of the explosive he could carry and started back toward the fire. It was a ter-

ribly dangerous journey, as a fall would spell disaster. The fire gave such a light, however, that they could see as clearly as in daytime, and it was not long before they had the high explosive in place in front of the approaching flames. Then all ran to a safe distance, while Tom set the charge off.

There was a terrific roar, and a cloud of gravel, chips, and other debris went flying through the air. When the smoke cleared away, the fire-fighters saw that they had a broad trench for hundreds of feet in both directions, with sand and gravel heaped up in great piles along its length.

It looked as though this would surely stop the fire, and for a time it seemed as though their hopes would be justified. The fire hesitated, and died down until it seemed to be only smouldering.

But suddenly a burning tree, almost uprooted by the explosion, toppled across the ditch, and before Tom or any of the others could get to the spot, the fire had taken hold again, and was rapidly spreading. All their work was wasted, and the fire was a good deal nearer the well than when they had started!

Still they fought on doggedly, blistered and smoke-begrimed. Carol and other women passed up and down the line with coffee and sandwiches. Tom and Ned were here, there and everywhere,

working feverishly and cheering on the men.

"We're goners though, old boy!" groaned Ned.

"Never say die!" panted Tom, feigning a confidence he was far from feeling. "We'll beat it yet."

But when the morning came, the fire was still gaining—gaining only by inches now in the desperate battle—but gaining. The gallant host of weary men still fought on, but they fought like men at bay, looking into the fiery eyes of doom!

CHAPTER XXV

VICTORY

Tom was as near despair as he ever permitted himself to be. It looked as though the well was doomed. Even though it was capped, he knew that if it became the center of those devouring flames the steel would melt and the fire come in contact with the oil. And this meant a catastrophe so appalling that none could foresee the consequences.

But it was not in his nature to quit, and he cudgeled his brain desperately to find some way of averting the calamity. Suddenly a thought came to him like an inspiration.

"Come along, Ned. You too, Koku," he shouted. "Mr. Damon, you keep the men working." And without waiting for an answer the young inventor started on a run for the *Winged Arrow.*

Ned and Koku were close on his heels when he reached the giant plane. Fortunately, it was always kept in readiness for instant flight.

"Jump in!" he shouted to his companions, setting the example.

He started the engine and the plane soared into the air and turned its nose toward Copperhead.

"Ned," he said, "those fire bombs of ours! We shipped a lot of them to Southern cities. Which is the nearest town that has some? Think quickly, old boy."

Ned caught on to Tom's idea instantly.

"We sent a lot of them to Dallas," he replied. "A big shipment went to Wesson and Robbins of that place. No doubt they have some of them on hand."

"Good!" cried the young inventor. "There's a flying field on the outskirts of that town. I'll let you down as near to Copperhead as possible. You rush to the office and get Wesson and Robbins on the long distance 'phone. Tell them to have a dozen of them at the flying field when I get there. I won't wait for you, but put right out for Dallas on the chance. It's nearly a hundred miles, but the *Winged Arrow* will make it in an hour. You hotfoot it back to the farm—get an auto or a horse—and take charge there till I get back. Keep the fire down as much as you can."

"I'll do it," said Ned. "Great head, old boy. Good luck."

In two minutes more they were close to Cop-

perhead. Tom swooped down, let Ned get out, and then with a whiz and a whirr rose and made for Dallas.

The fire bombs to which Tom referred were of his own invention and had achieved such remarkable results that they had been adopted by fire departments all over the United States. They contained chemicals of which Tom held the secret that were of wonderful efficiency in extinguishing fire. Tom had demonstrated their value on many occasions, notably when he had saved a great office building in a city not far from Shopton by dropping from an airplane the bombs containing the chemicals directly on the apparently doomed building, as narrated in the volume of this series entitled: "Tom Swift Among the Fire Fighters."

Tom's mind was a tumult of stormy thoughts. Would Wesson and Robbins have the bombs? Would Ned be able to get his message through in time? Even if these things went smoothly, would he get back before the flames reached the well, making all his efforts go for naught?

But he did not let these thoughts take his mind off the plane. This was vital. If the plane broke down, all hope would be gone.

So he urged and coaxed the plane along, pressing it to the utmost speed he dared. This was a race—a race against fire—a race against time!

Before long he could see the towers and steeples of the city in the distance. He neared it rapidly, straining his eyes to catch sight of the flying field with its white signals for the guidance of airmen.

Yes, there it was, and luckily on this side of the city. He swooped down and made his landing in close proximity to a loaded truck that he guessed might contain the bombs.

As he jumped out and ran toward it, he saw with a thrill of exultation the name of Wesson and Robbins on the truck. Ned had got the message through. Good old Ned!

It was the work of only a few minutes with the aid of Koku and the two burly truckmen to get the bombs transferred to the plane. And Tom blessed his stars that he had brought the big plane South with him instead of one of his smaller airships.

With a hurried word of thanks, Tom jumped into his seat and started on his homeward journey. On the way he instructed Koku to hold himself in readiness to drop the bombs when he should give the word.

In less than an hour, which seemed to him like an eternity, he had passed Copperhead. He had been straining his ears for the sound of an explosion and thanked heaven when it failed to come. But the angry glare that grew more vivid

as he approached told him that the fire demon was still trying to get at its prey.

In another minute or two he was circling above the Goby farm. Beneath him he could see men running for cover. He knew that Ned had seen him coming, and had ordered the men to disperse so that they would escape danger from the falling bombs.

He could see the flames eating their way ruthlessly toward the well, and only a few yards away from it. He steadied the airplane as nearly above the flames as possible. Koku was holding one of the bombs in readiness.

"Now!" cried Tom, and the giant dropped the bomb.

It fell about a hundred feet from the well, right in the midst of a seething caldron of flame.

The effect was instantaneous. The fire died out in a twinkling. For a wide area the red turned to black. Even the smoke disappeared and was replaced by a cloud of vapor that was slowly dissipated.

They were too high to hear the cheers that rose from the fire-fighters looking on, but Tom could see them waving their hats and hands and jumping up and down like mad.

Koku held another bomb poised aloft, and again at a signal from Tom he let it fall. It struck in a different place this time, but with the

same result. In the vicinity where it struck, the flames went out as though some wizard had turned a switch and extinguished them.

Several times this was repeated until Tom saw that the flames had been definitely conquered. Only little scattered patches were left, and these could easily be put out by hand. The young inventor had won the fight!

Only when he was sure of this did he swoop down to his usual landing place and get out, to be overwhelmed with cheers and handshakings and thumpings by Ned and Mr. Damon and the host of grimy fire-fighters with blackened hands and faces, all of them almost crazy with joy. What little was left to do was quickly done, and before long every spark had been extinguished. The well was saved!

It was a tired but happy group that sat in the living room of the Goby farmhouse that night. Mr. Goby's face was beaming. Mr. Damon was blessing everything and everybody.

In the kitchen, Koku was boasting of his exploits and Rad was belittling them, the only thing on which they agreed being that although there were some great men in the world, there was none so great as "Marse Tom."

Suddenly the door of the living room was flung open and a stalwart young fellow rushed in.

Every one looked up, startled by the unceremonious irruption. Carol sprang to her feet with a joyous cry, ran toward the newcomer, and threw her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Father!" she cried, "it's Hitt! It's brother! He's come back to us!"

The blind man tried to rise, but fell back in his chair. The next instant his son and daughter were beside him and he folded them in his arms.

Tom rose, followed by Ned and Mr. Damon, and tiptoed into the adjoining room, leaving the reunited family to themselves.

But they were called back before long, and Tom and Ned were overwhelmed with thanks by Hitt Goby for the way they had rescued him from death.

"And he's going to stay at home with us now for good," announced Carol happily.

Probably there was no happier home in Texas that night than the Goby farmhouse. Carol was in the seventh heaven of delight, her father's face was radiant, Hitt Goby was joyous. The happiness of the others, while perhaps not so rapturous, was not less real.

And Tom among the intervals of talk and laughter was thinking of—Mary. He was counting the hours before he could be back with her and share with her his triumphs.

But before that wished-for moment could be reached, there were many things that imperatively claimed his attention. He had a fortune in his well and in the other leases and purchases he had made in connection with his associates. And there was another fortune, and perhaps a bigger one, in that marvelous drill, whose achievements had so interested the captains of finance that offers for the patent rights were beginning to flow in on him from all directions. The first, and so far the best one, was from the company represented by Mr. Blythe. Some of these things had to be attended to by Tom personally and at once, but whatever was possible he left to Ned and Mr. Damon to adjust.

He had put inquiries on foot to find out the source of the mysterious fire, and one day was apprised by Judge Wilson that Hankinshaw had been arrested. One of the confederates he had employed had been arrested for another offense, and with the hope of getting a lighter sentence had revealed the incendiary plot. Warrants were out also for Thompson and Bragden, but those worthies had already put half a continent between them and their pursuers and had not yet been apprehended. Hankinshaw, however, was less lucky, and some time later was tried and sent to prison for a five-year term.

"That's one rascal that's got his deserts," remarked Tom.

"Not by a jugful!" exclaimed Ned. "He ought to have got twice as much."

"Bless my lockstep!" snorted Mr. Damon. "They should have sent him up for life."

"Oh, well, who cares?" Tom summed it up. "The main thing is that he didn't get away with it. We won out. The whole thing's been a great adventure."

The Goby family could not get over what Tom had done for them.

"You're a friend worth having," was the way Hitt Goby expressed himself. "If it wasn't for you, I don't know where I'd be to-day. Most likely in the cemetery."

"Oh, perhaps not as bad as that," returned the young inventor modestly.

"And see what he has done for the whole family!" cried Carol, her eyes sparkling. "Why, this oil is going to make Father rich."

"It's making us rich, too," said Tom.

"But think of what might have happened if we had put ourselves in the hands of those rascals," came from Mr. Goby. "I tell you, Tom Swift, you are one young man out of a million!"

"The best ever," murmured Hitt. "I'll bank on him every time."

"So will I," laughed Ned.

Tom could not stand all this praise, so he merely smiled and turned away. Yet it pleased him greatly.

Other adventures are still in store for Tom Swift, but these must be kept for another volume. For the present we will leave him with his great success in making a wonderful improvement in oil-well machinery and bringing in his Great Oil Gusher.

THE END

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